

The Devil's Little Fly

By Virginia Frazer Boyle

In the long ago, when the nether world was not so densely populated as it now is, and the days were not so full of interest, never having forgotten an early experience with a most beautiful woman, and often feeling the spirit of adventure strong upon him, the lord of that domain used to walk abroad upon the earth in the cool of the evening.

Many of these excursions were full of excitement and variety, and sometimes of great daring upon the part of Satan, as there was no need of the slightest disguise, for the world was not so wise as it is now, and those simple folk, both fine and poor, white and black, dallied with Satan without question.

But the subjugation of an entire plantation, from the "Quality" to the "Quarters," required time—more time, often, than Satan could give consecutively—so there were certain emissaries to be employed during enforced absences.

Now, by way of practice, the devil had conquered the "Quarters" of a great plantation, even to every soul, with the exception of an old mammy and a certain Zacheus who was very cautious, and was preparing plans for the "Big House," when something went wrong with the eternal fire below, and the devil was besought to depart in haste.

His old courier, the jay-bird, brought the message from the under world, whither he had gone to deposit his usual load of firewood; and he was in no fine humor, for every Friday he bitterly remembered the day he had sold himself, in an unguarded moment, to the devil, for a worm-eaten, half-filled ear of corn—"sight unseen," complained the jay to Mrs. Jay, when he sometimes filled the air with vain regrets.

"Dey says dat dey want you mighty bad down dar; de fire hain't half hot, an' dar's sumpen de matter wid de furnace," said the jay.

"You right sho dey needs me?" asked the devil, for he had other fish to fry that Friday morning.

"Course I is," said the jay, crossly, for he was very tired, and had carelessly gotten his feathers scorched in the lower regions. "Think I gwine come all de way back ter tell you er lie? Ax my cousin, de crow; he went wid me ter de do' an' heard 'em gib hit out!"

"Go back," said the devil, getting angry, "an' tell 'em I hain' gwine come twel dis day week, an' ter keep dat fire hot, if dey knows what's good fur deyse'fs I got er job er my own ter 'ten' ter, 'dout any partnerships!"

"Go ter hell yo'se'f! I hain't due dar twel nex' Friday, an' I hain't gwine budge twel den," said the jay-bird as he preened his scorched wing and flew away.

Now the devil had a love-affair on hand, one of those strange, inexplicable things that require very careful handling, and it was the same old cry down below—any ordinary devil who knew his business could attend to that.

So the devil importuned the crow to take the message; but Squire Billups had just planted a large field of corn; there was work enough in that for Mister Crow to do for a whole week; he was not compelled to serve the devil but a single day out of the week, and he had already given that service; besides, Mrs. Crow was just beginning to hatch, and no self-respecting *paterfamilias* could fail to be within call during such an important event. The owl was too blind to go, for the journey had to be made by daylight; the black-

snake was too sleepy, for his season was not yet fully arrived; the terrapin was too slow; and there was nothing left except the little fly; but the little fly was always ready, though his work must always be rendered upon the earth.

So, with many impatient stampings of his foot, the devil set about to take his departure. He got down upon his knees and blew his breath into a dandelion puff, and whispered to the seed, and a wind rose, and the seed scattered, and the down floated through an open window of the Big House and tickled Marse Charles's ear as he lay asleep.

Now Marse Charles was come to attend the house-party of Marse Beverly Baillie, and was mad with love of Miss Demetria, Marse Beverly's youngest daughters who looked above the highest, and had no mind to marry any man. But Marse Charles, in his cloak of green-and-gold lace, swore upon his jewelled sword that he would win. Even now, as he slept, he held between his moist fingers a withered rose that had nestled upon the bosom of the cold Demetria.

It was such as this that the devil was loath to leave, and as he blew the seeds of the dandelion ball he sowed the seeds of jealousy in Marse Charles's heart. Marse Charles sighed in his sleep, and clutched the withered rose; then the night became as daylight to him, and his eyes were wide open.

Biding his time, so that jealousy might breed the mushroom hate, the devil lingered, leaving the doubtful hours of the night to pass away; but between midnight and day, when the young man was wellnigh crazed with evil passions, the devil threw off all disguise and stood before him.

"Who are you?" cried Marse Charles, springing from his bed and stretching his swollen eyelids in the dusky light as his hand sought his sword.

"One who can do you a service," said the devil, talking fine, for he always chose his language according to his surroundings.

Marse Charles's brain was full of fever, and he put up his sword and listened, while he crushed nervously the rose within his palm.

"You are young, you are noble, you have the treasures of the earth before you," said the devil, soothingly, "and yet you are the most miserable man in all creation."

"What do you know about my misery?" cried Marse Charles, angrily.

"What do I *not* know?" asked the devil, sagely. "I know that you love Demetria, that she disdains you, that you have a rival."

"Ah!" sighed Marse Charles, "that is it—I have a rival! Whoever, whatever you are, aid me if you can, for I am mad with love. I have written a challenge to my rival, that we may settle this at daylight. I was about to send it when you called."

"Not so fast," said the devil, lifting a warning finger and drawing nearer. "Hot blood is the father of many regrets. Your rival is a better swordsman."

"But 'tis honor! I do this for my honor!" said Marse Charles, loudly, puffing out his breast, frog fashion.

"Hush! not so loud! Your honor will do you much credit when you rot in the ground, run through with your rival's sword," sneered the devil, "leaving him in possession of Demetria's favor. My plan is better than that."

"What is your plan, and who the devil are you?" cried Marse Charles, writhing at the possibility of losing Demetria.

"That's just it—I am he," said the devil, chuckling; and, stretching out his arm, he touched Marse Charles with a hand as soft as velvet. "The world is mine, and I would sit

upon a throne, my rightful seat, if it were not for this!" and he kicked out his hoof foot petulantly.

"Well, what is your plan? I haven't time to listen to your miserable troubles; I've enough of my own," said Marse Charles, impatiently.

"That's so; I was talking to no purpose then," said the devil, fingering Marse Charles's ruffles. "But this, briefly, is to the point. Upon a certain condition, if you will do as I bid you, Demetria shall detest the very presence of your rival, disasters shall come upon him, and, lastly, Demetria shall smile upon your suit."

"Words are cheap," said Marse Charles, languidly. "What proof can you give me that you can do all of these things?"

"Look upon the occurrences of every day—look out upon the world—what better proof need I give?" said the devil, archly. "Moreover, if you wish, you shall know the innermost life of your lady as though you held a mirror ever before her face; her every act, her every sigh, nothing shall be bidden from you that you may have the desire to hear or know."

Marse Charles pondered awhile, but the devil and the moonlight, together with his old-fashioned frenzy of love, had turned his head.

"Name your condition!" he cried, tearing the challenge into little bits; and there, in the beginning of the gray dawn, Marse Charles did what many a man, both before and since, has done.

It matters little to the story to give the exact specifications of the bargain, though Mammy, in the telling of it, was always very particular to describe minutely all of the virtues that go to make up the best part of a man—in other words, his soul. The awfulness of the bargain was duly impressed upon Mammy's small listeners; how Marse Charles, for the love of a woman, had given up happiness forever and forever; how the eternal fires of hell were to be kept at white heat with fiendish delight by those who had made similar bargains; how the days of his coming were written in fiery letters upon the walls, and there would be no water in all hell for Marse Charles to drink, save the tears of the lost, which flowed forever, and they were exceedingly bitter and full of regret.

"Can't he ever, ever get out, Mammy?" asked the little maid, whose lips were quivering, and whose great eyes were full of unshed tears.

"Yas, honey," said Mammy, hastily, "if er good hoodoo kim erlong 'fore de bref leabe Marse Charles, er 'pentance him 'fore de wo'ms 'stroy de body—an' er good hoodoo sho gwine kim!—so don' you cry, honey!"

But now, said Mammy, the devil had his man hard and fast, heart and hand, and when it became his time to leave the earth for a season he took Marse Charles out into a lonely place, and put into his hand a tiny snuff-box made of gold, curiously wrought upon the top.

"I will leave you now," said the devil, "for the rest will be fair sailing. I have jaundiced your Demetria's eyes to your rival. She sees that he has a squint, and talks with a drawl, and that he drags one foot in dancing. Misery is entering her soul, and she is very unhappy, for she believes that the squint is due to the hard counting of her father's acres and slaves.

"In this box," continued the devil, "I leave you my most useful possession, one that will never slumber and never sleep. You can keep watch upon Demetria when she goes

abroad; but when the doors are closed between you, when you would know her every word and every act, just open the box, for nothing can be hid from the little fly. In two weeks I will come again, and in the meantime I wish you joy.”

So the devil went back to hell, chuckling as he went, for he carried Marse Charles’s conscience, fluttering like a wounded bird, in his hand, and Marse Charles put the little gold box beneath his lace ruffles and went on his way rejoicing.

Now it chanced soon after that there was a great meet, and the ladies and their gallants rode into the far woods. It was a fine company, for Marse Beverly Baillie had scattered his invitations broadcast, that the world might see the young Demetria. Marse Charles, on his great bay, rode sulkily alone, for his rival was in a high humor, having been paired to ride with the fair Demetria.

As he rode, Marse Charles was ready to question the efficacy of his bargain, when, just in the second mile, his rival’s horse went lame—so lame that he was forced to turn back, and Marse Charles, with much bantering and light laughter, gallantly rode forward with a dozen others to take his place. But the sun shone for Marse Charles and the world was fair, for Demetria gave him her sweetest smile.

Late in the day the rival came, upon a fresher horse; but Demetria had no eyes for him, all of her favors were reserved for Marse Charles; and as they rested upon a shady knoll after dinner, beside a bubbling spring, Marse Charles lost no time, and told his love in most vehement fashion.

But perplexities will creep in, even into the best-planned schemes, for as Marse Charles talked he thoughtlessly drew from his bosom the devil’s snuff-box, and as he toyed idly with the lid the sharp eyes of Demetria remarked its curious workmanship.

“A trophy!—a memento to mark the day!” she cried, throwing down a jewelled medallion, into which she had deftly slipped a ring of her own bright hair.

“A pawn of love as precious as heart’s blood!” cried Marse Charles, twirling his mustache and gallantly kissing the golden curl as he threw upon the grass an Egyptian bracelet, which he always wore concealed from view, and which held a tiny needle and a poisoned drop, forgotten by Marse Charles.

“No!” pouted the spoiled Demetria “A manlier trophy—I would have the box—the little box you toyed with just now!”

The blood of poor Marse Charles ran cold. What would he not give to please the sweet Demetria? He almost reached his hand to yield it, but the little fly buzzed hard within, and, starting with a shock, he hid it in his bosom.

“A princess wore the bracelet once,” began Marse Charles. “It has a wonderful history. Make it more wonderful and wear it for me, sweet!”

“But I would have the box!”

“But it will make thee sneeze

“Then I will sneeze! Your love means less than any bubble here if you shall hold so fast to such a trifling thing!”

Then Demetria shed tears, and more reproaches followed, and Marse Charles, cold even to the marrow’s centre from fear, let loose the devil’s little fly and threw the box upon the grass.

“How beautiful!” said Demetria, snatching it up; “but, Charles, you played me false; it holds no snuff, and cannot make me sneeze. I only thought to try you, but now I will not give it back again, to punish you for the teasing!”

So Charles, restored, basked in the light of love, and comforted himself with the thought that Demetria soon would tire of the box.

There was fine sport and much merriment in the far wood, and such ado to make shelter when a thunder-storm came on. But the rain would not cease, and, in the cold drizzle which followed, the gay company, with limp gauderies and feathers, mounted for the return. But nothing damped the ardor of Marse Charles, and, as they rode, his hearty laughter, mingled with Demetria’s, fell upon the ears of the cavalcade.

Marse Charles had made a scoop at something with his hand, and Demetria laughed again. “On my word, Mr. Charles, such grace it has seldom been my good fortune to see!”

“A most persistent fly,” said Marse Charles, catching at it again, as he felt the cold clinging feet upon his forehead. Then, suddenly remembering, he was silent, and with reddening cheek he caught the little fly out of the rain into the folds of his cloak.

The days wore on, and, as the devil had promised, disasters, one close upon the heels of another, overtook the rival of Marse Charles. Now it was an ague, now a broken limb, now a fever—so fast they came, indeed, that he dared not try to reach his home between his woes; and, courteous to all men, Demetria salted his gruel, but made sweet eyes at Marse Charles.

But all this time Marse Charles was troubled about the little fly. Demetria still treasured the box, and there was no spot in which to keep the little fly in safety. Marse Charles felt that it was a precious trust, and faith must be kept by a man of honor, though even with the devil. And sometimes, but for an opportune buzz, Marse Charles would have killed it for a common house pest, which always made him very serious.

Every day and every night the little fly brought in a full report, over which Marse Charles gloated as a miser over gold; but at last even the devil’s emissary grew weary of roosting in precarious places, and considering that Marse Charles had broken faith by disposing of the box, was less and less vigilant, and finally cultivated a spirit of rebellion.

Now Demetria was blessed with an old main-my, as fine a blending of mother-wit and shrewdness as ever wore a Madras kerchief, and who was married to that Zacheus who dealt in charms and “cungers.”

Every night since Demetria’s babyhood Mammy had drawn the bed-curtains for her mistress, and sitting in the same old chair, had fanned and told her stories until she fell asleep; but of late Demetria was restless, and the stories did not soothe. In vain Mammy shook the curtains and drew them farther back, then opened the French windows wide upon the broad veranda. In vain she brushed out the long yellow locks; Demetria still sighed, and would not close her eyes.

“What ail my chile?” crooned Mammy, softly wielding her great palm-leaf, and forgetful that she was speaking to other than a child.

“I’m miserable, Mammy, miserable, ever since the day of the meet. Something seems to be taking my strength. See how I have fallen away!” And the little figure in its white robes was small enough indeed.

“Um!” crooned Mammy. “I gwine rnek my chile some sassafac tea—dat mek her better! Hi! dar dat mizerbul fly ergin! I sho gwine git hit out ‘fore I lets down de bar dis night. Don’ be ’feared, honey!”

“It’s no use. I can’t sleep, Mammy!” said Demetria, fretfully.

“Nebber min’,” said Mammy, as soft as a cradle-song; “yo’ be all right bimeby. Hain’t yo’ tell Marse Charles yo’ mb him? Hain’t yo’ done promus ter marry wid him whedder Marse Avery die or no? An’ hain’t Marse Charles des plum crazy ’bout yo’, an’ cain’t say ‘good-bye’ ’fore he say ‘howdy,’ fur de lub er yo’?”

“Yes, yes,” said Demetria, wearily, “and yet I am not happy, Mammy.”

“My Lord!—wid all dem di’munts an’ things? Yo’ is er mighty sp’ilt chile, honey! But I hope do it,” added Mammy, complacently. “Nebber min’, baby, yo’ be all right arter while; yo’ des narvous.”

“Cuss dat fly!” said Mammy, under her breath, for the little thing eluded her at every turn, and, giving it up, Mammy softly fanned until Demetria moaned in uneasy slumber.

“I gwine git ter de bottom er dis. Hain’t all right, sho ’nough. I been er-tryin’ nigh outer two weeks now, an’ I cain’t ketch dat fly nary time!”

Demetria’s hand was under her pillow, as it had been on all of these restless nights.

“Won’er what she got unner dar, po’ little gal!”

Mammy tenderly drew the little hand from its hiding, and in its palm the devil’s snuff-box lay. Mammy eyed it curiously.

“Mighty quare thing fur my chile ter hug up so close, fur she des hate snuff! Um! dat ole fly sho think dat box got sugar in it—Shoo!”

But curiosity was too much for Mammy, and she opened the lid, and the fly dropped down and nestled in the corner of the box. Mammy closed the lid with a snap, shutting the little fly in.

“Sumpen mighty quare ’bout dis. I gwine tek dis ter Zacheus!”

The whole plantation rang next day with the loss of the curious box, an heirloom and a token from Marse Charles to Demetria; but the box was not found, and Marse Charles wandered about, pale and ill at ease, for the little fly did not return.

The narrative of the dusky story-teller does not falter at this juncture, for there were always three pairs of eager eyes that were burning into hers. “Zacheus was the hoodoo—the good hoodoo who could steal souls back from the devil!” sang the chorus.

“Um—and when de ole mammy what were his wife lay de gole-worked box in Zacheus’s han’, Zacheus gib er great big laugh, ’case es soon es hit tech his han’ hit turn ter nuffin but er debil’s snuff-box—you know, chillen—one er dem brown spongy things wid dus’ in ’em dat you fin’ in de woods; an’ den de little fly fly up mighty survigrous an’ try ter bite Zacheus on de mouf.”

“An’ dat what de little miss been sleepin’ wid unner her head?” said Zacheus. “De charm Marse Charles gib her? Um, dar’s work for Zacheus!”

Of course the gold snuff-box was never found, though the plantation was searched far and near, and to Demetria no one bemoaned its loss louder than Mammy; but down in the Quarters, when she could steal away, she was watching Zacheus mix his pot of sweet ointment with which to kill the fly, for the fly would not eat.

“I kin kill de fly,” growled Zacheus, “but I don’ wante ‘do’ Marse Charles, so I gotter change de charm.”

Marse Charles, whiter and thinner by reason of sleeplessness, listened to Demetria’s songs with a ringing in his ears, and gorged every common house-fly that he could coax, on sugar, in the vain hope of finding again the devil’s little fly; but the little fly was lying with stiff wings outside of Zacheus’s pot of ointment, and James, the barber, had given Zacheus a lock of Marse Charles’s hair.

The time was up. The devil would return. What then?

Marse Charles hardly remembered how it was, but once again, after a night when sleep would not come, he found himself sitting opposite, in the hazy light, as once before.

“How dare you”—said the devil — “part with my box, to give it as a token, a lover’s toy? You have forfeited your bargain, and I am undone; but the girl is mine!”

“No!” cried Marse Charles, his eyes starting from their sockets.

“I tell you that I love her—that I am mad with love for her—and by the token that she keeps she is lost!”

“The token cannot be found,” said Marse Charles.

“What does it matter? She is mine. She is mine!” cried the devil, tremulous with passion, for the hoodoo had given him a human heart in order to torment him and to change the charm. “Do you think that I would yield her now, to such dirty scum as you?”

“I will protect her with my life, even if I cannot win her,” said Marse Charles, hotly, for the devil in his rage had let loose Marse Charles’s conscience.

“Choose your weapons,” said the other, mockingly, “for the sword of the devil is a double-pointed sword; it wounds the soul, not the flesh—the spirit, not the body.”

And back of the orchard, said Mammy, while the whole world was asleep, was fought grimly and silently the bitterest duel of the earth.

There were no witnesses save Zacheus, and though he rendered yeoman service to his mistress and to her lover’s bartered soul, he looked upon the duel, and Mammy solemnly declared that the sight of it made him blind.

Through and through, the devil thrust Marse Charles, but the blade came out dry and bright; not a drop of blood was spilled; and after Marse Charles’s lunges, Zacheus swore that he could see the light through the body of the devil.

Marse Charles was almost sinking to his knees, and the devil raised his arms exulting, when on a sudden impulse Marse Charles rose with a mighty effort and made a double cut in the shape of a cross on the breast of his opponent. That was what he should have done long ago, said Mammy; even if he had only worn a little gold cross on his watch-guard it would have been a protection, for at Marse Charles’s new movement the devil gave one hoarse cry and fled into the shadows of the breaking day.

Of course the “Quality” at the Big House did not know of the plotting that had been going on, or of the fearful duel that had ended it. *They* were not the privileged beings of the earth, and so they only knew it was with pale brow and downcast eyes that Marse Charles came to say farewell, and that Marse Beverly Baillie clapped him on the shoulder, like the good soul that he was, by way of comfort— “To think my minx Demetria should flirt you!” cried Marse Beverly; “for she marries Avery in the fall. But cheer up, lad, cheer up! There’re as good fish yet to catch as ever have been caught.”