

The Devil to Pay

By Max Pemberton

To say that the usually amiable Ambrose Cleaver was in the devil of a temper would be merely to echo the words of his confidential clerk, John, who, looking through the glass partition between their offices, confessed to James, the office boy, that he had not seen such goings on since old Ambrose, the founder of the firm, was gathered to his fathers.

“There won’t be a bit of furniture in the place presently,” said he, “and I wouldn’t give twopence for the cat when he’s finished kicking her. This comes of the women, my boy. Never have nothing to say to a woman until you’ve finished your dinner and lighted your cigar. Many a good business have I seen go into the Bankruptcy Court because of a petticoat before lunch. You keep away from ’em if you want to be Lord Mayor of London, same as Dick Whittington was.”

James did not desire particularly to become Lord Mayor of London, but he was greatly amused by his employer’s temper.

“Never heard such language,” said he— “and him about to marry her. Why, he almost threw them jewels at her ’ead; and when she told him he must have let the devil in by accident, he says as he was always glad to see her friends. They’ll make a happy couple, surely.”

John shook his old dense head, and would express no opinion upon the point.

“Misfortunes never come singly,” said he. “Here’s that Count Florian waiting for him in the ante-room. Now that’s a man I can’t abide. If anybody told me he was the devil, I’d believe him soon enough. A bad ’un, James, or I don’t know the breed. An evil man who seems to pollute the very air you breathe.”

James was not so sure of it.

“He give me half a crown for fetching of a cab yesterday, and told me to go to the music-hall with it. He must have a lot of money, for he never smokes his cigars more than half-way through, and he wears a different scarf-pin every day. That’s wot comes of observation, Mr. John. I could tell you all the different pairs of trousers he’s worn for the last three weeks, and so I’m going to make my fortune as the advertisements say.”

Mr. John would not argue about that. The bell of the inner office now tinkled, and that was an intimation that the Count Nicholas Florian was to be admitted to the Holy of Holies. So the old man hurried away and, opening the sacred door with circumspection, narrowly escaped being knocked down by an enraged and hasty cat—glad to escape that inferno at any cost.

“You rang, sir?”

Ambrose Cleaver, thirty-three years of age, square-jawed, fair-haired, a florid complexion and with a wonderful pair of clear blue eyes, admitted that he did ring.

“And don’t be so d—d slow next time,” he snapped. “I’ll see the Count Florian at once.”

The old man withdrew timidly, while his master mopped up the ink from the pot he had broken in his anger.

“Enough to try the devil himself,” was the sop that argument offered to his heated imagination. “She knows I hate Deauville like poison, and of course it’s to Deauville she

must go for the honeymoon. And she looks so confoundedly pretty when she's in a temper—what wonderful eyes she's got! And when she's angry the curls get all round her ears, and it's as much as a man can do not to kiss her on the spot. Of course, I didn't really want her to have opals if she thinks they're unlucky, but she needn't have insisted that I knew about it and bought them on purpose to annoy her. Good God! I wish there were no women in the world sometimes. What a splendid place it would be to live in, and what a fine time the men would have—for, of course, they are all the daughters of the devil really, and that's why they make life too hot for us."

Mr. John entered at this moment showing in the Count, and so a very cheerful argument was thus cut short, Ambrose pulled himself together and suppressing, as best could, any appearance of aversion from the caller who now presented himself, he sat back in his chair and prepared to hear "the tale."

Count Florian was at that time some fifty-nine years of age, dark as an Italian and not without trace of an Eastern origin. Though it was early in the month of May, he still wore a light Inverness cape of an ancient fashion, while his patent-leather boots and his silk hat shone with the polish of a well-kept mirror. When he laughed, however, he showed ferocious teeth, some capped with gold, and in his eyes was a fiery light not always pleasant to behold.

"A chilly morning," he began. "You have no fire, I see."

"You find it so?" queried Ambrose. "Well, I thought it quite warm."

"Ah," said the count, "you were born, of course, in this detestable country. Do not forget that where I live there are people who call the climate hell," and he laughed sardonically, with a laugh quite unpleasant to hear.

Ambrose did not like such talk, and showed his displeasure plainly.

"The climate is good enough for me," he said. "Personally, I don't want to live in the particular locality you name. Have a cigar and tell me why you called—the old business, I suppose? Well, you know my opinion about that. I want none of it. I don't believe it is honest business, and I think that if we did it, we might all end in the dock. So you know my mind before we begin."

The Count heard him patiently, but did not seem in any way disturbed.

"There is very little business that is honest," he said; "practically none at all. Look at politics, the Church, art, the sciences—those who flourish are the imposters, while your honest men are foolish enough to starve in garrets. If a man will undertake nothing that is open to the suspicion of self-interest, he should abandon all his affairs at once and retire to a monastery, where possibly he will discover that the prior is cheating the abbot and the cellarer cheating them both. You have a great business opportunity, and if anybody suffers it is only the Government, which you must admit is a pure abstraction—suggesting chiefly a company of undiscovered rascals. The deal which I have to propose to you concerns a sum of half a million sterling, and that is not to be passed by lightly. I suggest, therefore, that at least you read the documents I have brought with me, and that we leave the matter of honesty to be discussed by the lawyers."

He laid upon the table a bundle of papers as he spoke, and lighted a cigarette by lightly rubbing a match against the tip of the fourth finger of his left hand. Ambrose felt strangely uneasy. A most uncanny suspicion had come upon him while the man was speaking. He felt that no ordinary human being faced him, and that he might in very truth be talking with the devil. Nor would this idea quit him despite its apparent absurdity.

“You must have great influence, Count,” he remarked presently—“great influence to get such a valuable commission as this!”

The Count was flattered.

“I have servants in every country,” he said; “the rich are always my friends—the poor often come to me because they are not rich. Few who know me can do without me; indeed I may say that but for such men as I am the world would not go on. I am the mainspring of its endeavour.”

“And yet when I met you it was on the links above La Turbie.”

The count laughed, showing his glittering teeth as any carnivorous animal might have done.

“Ah, I remember. You met me when I was playing golf with a very saintly lady. Latterly, I hear, she has ceased to go to church and taken to bobbed hair. Women are strange creatures, Mr. Cleaver, but difficult, very difficult sometimes. I have had many disappointments with women.”

“You find men easier?”

“Indeed, there are few men who are not willing to go to the devil if the consideration be large enough. A woman, on the other hand, is too often the victim of her emotions. She will suffer eternal torment for the man she loves, and she will cheat for him. But for the rest of us—nothing, positively nothing at all; she is neither honest nor dishonest, she merely passes us by.”

“Ah,” exclaimed Ambrose, a little wearily, “I wish I could think that about my *fiancée*. She’s just been up—that’s why you find me upset. I bought her opals, and, of course, she wants diamonds. You see, I forgot she wasn’t born in October.”

The Count nodded his head in sympathy.

“I must have a little talk to her. I am sure we shall good friends. Miss Kitty Palmer, is it not? Forgive me, I read it in the newspapers—a charming face but a little temper, I think. Well, well, there is no harm in that. What a dull place the world would be but for a little temper! You have much to be thankful for, Mr. Cleaver—very, very much. And now this concession, by which you will make two hundred thousand pounds at a very moderate estimate. There will be very little temper when you take home that news. No woman is angry with a man who makes money, but she has a great contempt for him who does not.”

“Even if he made it dishonestly?”

“She does not care a snap of the fingers how he makes it, believe me.”

“And afterwards, when he goes to prison—”

“Pshaw—only fools go to prison. If your foolish principles were made the test, there would hardly be a free man in Mincing Lane. We should have to lock up the whole City. Come, let me have your signature, and I will do the rest. To refuse is madness. You are offered the chance of a lifetime.”

Ambrose did not reply to him immediately. It had come to him suddenly that this was the hour of a great temptation, and he sat very still, conscious that his heart beat fast because of the evil that was near him. The Count watched him, meanwhile, as a wild beast may watch its prey. The man’s eyes appeared to have turned to coals of fire; his fingers twitched; his teeth were on edge—he had even ceased to smoke.

“Well?” he said at last, unable to suffer the silence any longer.

Ambrose rose from his chair and went over slowly to the great safe, which stood in the corner of his office; he unlocked it and took some documents from a shelf upon the right-hand side. The Count stood at his elbow while he did so, and he could feel the man's breath warm upon his shoulder.

Suddenly a violent impulse overcame him. He swung round and seized the fellow by the collar, and in an instant, endowed as it were with superhuman strength, he hurled the man into the safe and turned the key upon him.

"By heaven!" he cried, "but I have locked up the devil."

II

Ambrose dismissed John, the man, and James, the boy, and told them he would have no need of their services for some days.

"I am going away for a little holiday," he said. "The letters can await my return. You may both go down to Brighton for a week, and I will pay your expenses. It is right that you should have a little change of air more than once a year, so away with you both, and don't let me hear of you until Monday next."

James looked at John and John looked at James. Was their excellent employer demented, then, or had they understood him incorrectly?

"Not," said John, when they were alone together, "that I particularly wished to go to Brighton just now, but there you are. Half the pleasure in life, my boy, is wanting to do things, and when you have to do them without wanting it, even though they are pleasant things, somehow all the savour has gone out of the salt, so to speak. But, of course, we shall have to go, seeing that we couldn't tell Mr. Cleaver a lie."

James was a little astonished at that, for he had told thousands of lies in his brief life, though now he really had no desire to tell one at all.

"I shall be glad to get away from here for a few days, any'ow," he said; "it's so 'ot and close, and when you go near the safe in the other horfice it's just as though you stood by a roaring fire. Good thing, Mr. John, that the thing is fire-proof, or we might have the whole show burned down, as Mr. Ambrose hisself was saying. 'Very 'ot for the time of year, James,' says he, and 'burnin, 'ot,' says I. We'll find it cooler at Brighton, Mr. John, and perhaps we can go to the pictures, hough I'm fed up with all them rotten stories about crooks and such like, and so are you, I'm sure."

Mr. John said that he was, though he was surprised at such an opinion emanating from James. When they locked up the inner office—their master being gone home—they discovered in the fire-grate the ashes of what had been a formidable-looking document, and it really did seem as though the concrete upon which the great safe stood had become quite hot, but there was no visible sign of fire, and so they went off, wondering and contented, but by no means in a mood of exhilaration, as properly they should have been.

Ambrose had taken a cab at his own door, and his first visit was to the Bond Street jeweller who had sold him the opals.

He was quite sure that he had shut up the devil in his office safe, and as he drove it seemed to him that he became conscious of a new world round about him, though just how it was new he could not have told you.

Everybody wore a look of great content—there was subdued laughter but no real merriment—nor did any hasten as though he had real business to do; while the very taxi-

cabs drove with circumspection, and actually waited for old ladies to cross the street before them. When his own cab stopped he gave the man half a crown as usual; but the driver called him back and pointed out his error.

“Excuse me, sir, eighteenpence is the fare with three-pence for my gratuity, that makes one and ninepence. So I have to give you ninepence back, although I thank you all the same.”

Ambrose pocketed the money, quite insensible of anything but the man’s civility, and entered immediately into the sanctum of the great jeweller. He found that worthy a little distraught and far from any desire to do big business. In fact, his first words told of his coming retirement from an occupation which had enriched him during a good forty years of profit and rarely of loss.

“The fact is, Mr. Cleaver, that I foresee the day coming when women will wear no jewellery. Already the spirit of competition has passed, and it is by competition and the pride of competition that this trade has flourished. A woman buys a rope of pearls because another woman wears one. Lady A cannot allow Lady B to have more valuable diamonds than she possesses. Very few really admire the gems for their own sake, and when you think of the crimes that have been committed because of them, the envious passions they arouse, and the swindles to which they give birth, then, indeed, we may wish that every precious stone lay deep at the bottom of the sea.”

“But, my dear sir, are you not thus banishing much beauty from the world—did not the Almighty create precious stones for pretty women to wear?”

The jeweller shrugged his shoulders, sweeping aside carelessly some priceless pearls that lay on the table before him.

“The Almighty created them to lie securely in their shells, or deep in the caverns of the earth; for the rivers to wash them with sweet waters or the lurid fire to shape them in the bowls of the mountains. The beauties given us to enjoy are those upon which our eyes may light in the woodlands or from the heights—the glory of the sunset, the stillness of the sea, the thousand hues of a garden of flowers, or the cascade as it falls from the mountain top. These things are common to all, but the precious stone is too often for the neck or the fingers of the harlot and the adventuress. No, sir, I shall retire from this business and seek out some quiet spot where I can await with composure the solemn moment of dissolution we all must face.”

Ambrose was almost too astonished to speak.

“I admire your philosophy,” he said at length, “but the fact is, that I want a diamond ring and a rope of pearls and if—”

“Ah,” said the old man interrupting him, “it is odd that you should speak of pearls, for I have just been telling my partner here that whatever he may do in the future, he will find pearls of little profit to him. What with imitations and the ‘cultured’ article, women are coming already to despise them. But even if you take your *fiancée* a diamond ring, will she not merely say to herself: ‘an excellent beginning, now what is the next thing I can get out of him?’ Be wise and cultivate no such spirit of cupidity, foreign to a good woman’s nature but encouraged by the men, who, for vanity’s sake, heap presents upon her. Take rather this little cross, set with pure amethysts, the emblem of faith and so discover, my dear sir, whether she loves the man or the jewel, for indeed but few women love both, as all their story teaches us.”

Ambrose took the cross and thanked the old man for his words of wisdom. Another cab carried him on his way to Upper Gloucester Place where Kitty Palmer then lived with her saintly mother—and as he went, he reflected upon the jeweller's words.

"I'll put her to the proof," he said to himself, "if she likes this twopenny halfpenny cross, she is a miracle among women. But, of course, she won't like it and there'll be another scene. What a devil of a temper she was in this morning and how she made the fur fly! If she's like that now, I shall just take her into my arms and kiss her until she's done fighting. After all, I wouldn't give sixpence for a woman who had no spirit. It's their moods that make them so fascinating—little devils that they are at their best!"

The arrival at the house cut short his ruminations and he hastened into the well-known drawing-room and there waited impatiently while the maid summoned Kitty from her bedroom. She came down immediately to his great surprise—for usually she kept him waiting at least half an hour—and her mood was strangely changed, he thought. A pretty, flaxen-haired, blue-eyed, cream and white English type she was, but her chin spoke also of determination and the eyes which could "look love to eyes that looked again," upon occasion could also speak of anger which resented all control. This afternoon, however, Kitty was as meek as a lamb. She had become so utterly changed in an hour that Ambrose hardly knew her.

"My dear girl," he began, "I am so sorry that I lost my temper this morning—"

"Oh, no—not you, Ambrose dear. It was I—of course it was awfully silly and we won't go to Deauville if you don't want to. Let it be Fontainebleau by all means—though really, it does not seem important whether we do get married or don't while you love me. Love after all is what matters, isn't it, Ambrose dearest?"

He had to say that it was, though he did not like her argument. When, with some hesitation and not a little fear he showed her the little gold cross, she admitted to his astonishment that it was one of the prettiest things she had ever seen.

"Somehow," she said, "I do not seem to care much for jewellery now. It has become so vulgar—the commoner the people, the more diamonds they wear. I shall treasure this, darling—I'll wear it now at lunch. Of course you are going to take me to lunch, aren't you? Suppose we go to the Ritz grill-room, the restaurants are so noisy, and I know that you like grill-rooms, don't you, dear?"

Ambrose said "yes" and they started off. Somehow he felt rather depressed and he had to confess that Kitty—usually so smart—looked quite shabby. She wore one of her oldest dresses and obviously had neither powder on her face nor the lightest touch of the rouge which became her so well. Moreover, she was listless beyond experience, and when he asked her if she would go to the Savoy and dance that night, she answered that she thought she would give up dancing altogether. It quite took his breath away.

"Give up dancing—but, Kitty, you're mad about it!"

"No, dear, I was mad to be mad about it: but what good does it do to anybody, just going up and down and round and round with a man you may never see again. Surely we were not sent into the world to do that! Ask the vicar of the parish what he thinks, or Doctor Lanfry, who is doing such splendid work at the hospitals. I think we have to make good in life, and dancing, surely, will not help us. So I mean to give it up, and smoking and all horrid things. I'm sure you'll like me better for that, dear; you know how jealous my dancing used to make you, but now you'll never have any cause to be jealous again."

Ambrose did not know what to say. This seemed to him quite the flattest lunch he had ever sat out with her, while, as for the people round about, he thought he had never seen a duller lot. Perhaps, after all, he had been a little hasty in shutting up the devil so unceremoniously, but it made him laugh to think that the fellow would get no lunch anyway and that his stock of cigars would hardly last him through the day. "And at any rate," he argued, "the rascal will do no mischief to-day."

He drove Kitty to the King's New Hospital when the stupid meal was over—she was visiting some old people there—and while he waited for her, he met Dr. Lanfry himself and had a little chat with that benevolent old gentleman. Naturally their talk concerned the hospital and he was not a little surprised to find the worthy doctor altogether in an optimistic mood.

"Yes," he said, "we shall have no need of these costly places. Disease is disappearing rapidly from our midst. I see the day coming when men and women will go untroubled by any ailment from the cradle to the grave. In some ways, I confess the world will be poorer. Think of all the human sympathy which human suffering awakens—the profound love of the mother for the ailing child, the sacrifice of those who wait and watch by the beds of the sick, the agony of parting leading to the eternal hope in the justice of God. All these things, the world will miss when we conquer disease, and the spirit will be the poorer for them. Indeed, I foresee the day when men will forget the existence of God just because they have no need to pray for those who suffer; the devil will have no work to do in that day; but, who knows, humanity may be worse and not better because of his idleness."

Ambrose agreed with him, though he would never have expressed such sentiments to Kitty. He found her a little sad when she came out of the ward, and it seemed that all the patients were so very much better that they cared but little for her kindly attentions, and when she tried to read to them, most of them fell asleep. So she went back to Ambrose and asked him to drive to the vicarage where she hoped to see Canon Kenny, her good pastor, and find out if he could tell her of some work of mercy to be done.

"I feel," she said, "that I must find out the sorrow in the world, I must help it."

"But suppose, my dear, that there isn't any sorrow—"

"Oh, then the world would not be worth living in, I should go out to the islands of the Pacific and become a missionary. Do you know, Ambrose dear, I've often thought of putting on boys' clothes and going to live in the wilderness. A boy seems so much more active than a girl, and what does it matter since sex no longer counts?"

He looked at her aghast.

"Sex no longer counts!"

"No," she said in the simplest way, "people will become too spiritual for that. You will have to love me as though I were your sister, Ambrose—"

Ambrose gulped down a "d—n" and was quite relieved to find himself presently in the study of the venerable canon, who, was just leaving England for a Continental holiday. He said that he was not tired, but really there was very little work to do—and he added, with a laugh: "It would almost appear, my children, as though some one had locked up the devil and there was no more work left for us parsons."

"But that surely would be a great, good thing," exclaimed Ambrose, astonished.

"In a way, yes," the canon rejoined, "but consider, all life depends upon that impulse which comes of strife—strife of the body, strife of the soul. I worship God believing He

has called upon me to take my share in fighting the evil which is in the world. Remove that evil, and what is my inspiration? Beyond the grave, yes, there may be that sphere of holiness to which the human condition contributes nothing—a sphere in which all happiness, all goodness centres about the presence of the Eternal—but here we know that man must strive or perish, must fight or be conquered—must school his immortal soul in the fire of temptation and of suffering. So, I say, it may even be a bad day for the world could the devil be chained in bonds which even he could not burst. It might even be the loss the knowledge of the God by whom evil is permitted to live that good may come.”

This and much more he said, always in the tone of one who bared his head to destiny and had a faith unconquerable. When they left him, Kitty appeared to have made her mind, and she spoke so earnestly that even her lover would not argue with her.

“Ambrose, dear,” she said, “I must see you no more, I shall devote my life to good works. To-night I shall enter the Convent of the Little Sisters at Kensington. It is a good-bye, my dearest.”

He no answer her, but calling a taxi, he ordered the man to drive to Throgmorton Street like the deuce.

III

He had told James and John to go home, but to his annoyance he found them still in the office and busy as though nothing extraordinary had happened. Brushing by them, he dashed into the inner room and turned the key in the lock of his safe.

“Come out!” he cried, but nobody answered him.

It was odd, but when he looked inside that massive room of steel, nobody was to be discerned there. At the same instant, however, he heard the Count’s voice immediately behind him, and turning he discovered the man at his elbow.

“Well?” asked the fellow.

So there he stood, exactly in the same attitude as Ambrose had left him when he crossed the room to find the document. Indeed, the very same cigarette was held by his evil-looking fingers, and it was clear that he waited for the word which would signify acceptance of his contract.

“Good heavens,” thought Ambrose, “I must have imagined it all.”

He returned to his chair and tossed the paper across the table.

“I refuse to sign it,” he said curtly, “you had better call on Alderman Karlbard; he’s a church-warden, a justice of the peace and a philanthropist. He’s your man and he’s pretty sure to end in prison anyway.”

“Thank you for your introduction,” said the Count quietly, and, bowing, he withdrew with the same nonchalant air as he had entered. Trust the devil to know when he is beaten.

Ambrose watched him go and then calling John, he asked what time it was.

“A quarter to one, sir,” said that worthy.

“Just in time to lunch with Kitty,” Ambrose thought. And then jumping up as a man who comes by a joyous idea, he cried: “By Gad, what a row I mean to have with her—the darling!”