

A Rustic Priest Gets What He Deserves

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How Lucifer's pestiferous plan is turned against him. With the Madonna's assistance, a girl's honor is saved and another soul sent to heaven.

Prologue

In 1588 Galileo Galilei gave two public lectures at the Florentine Academy on the exact dimensions, size, and location of Dante's *Hell*. The mouth was located on an island in the southern hemisphere, buried under a mound that measured 405 15/22 miles of depth. Hell itself a hole beneath the mound, caused by the impact of Lucifer and the other rebel angels hitting Earth after being kicked out of heaven. The hole extended to the center of the planet, at the bottom of which was Satan's icy pit.

Deep in Hell's eighth circle of the Malebolges, in the fifth pouch, gigantic billowing clouds of thick, black smoke spewed forth a throat-choking stench from a pit of roiling, molten pitch. From bridges of iron-colored stone, squads of winged black demons, the "Evil Clawed Ones," threw newly arrived sinners guilty of fraud, into the noxious pit, and then struck ferociously at them with their devilish hooks, pushing them under so that only their asses bobbed above the scorching surface.

The tusk-faced demons then seized the next piteous shades, flinging them over their shoulders before racing back to the pit. Snarling hideously, their talons gripped the edge as they prepared to heave their loads into the searing pitch. Suddenly, in this dimly lit horrorscape, the demon Rubicante raised his hairy face, rolling upwards his yellowish eyes upwards as the sound of his master's bellow echoed inside of his head.

"Halt your labors and come to me!"

Rubiconte knew what was coming. Heaving his latest victim into the pitch, he angrily hurled his hook at the sinner's steaming rump before spreading his bat-like wings. He soared up just above the burgeoning black clouds. Then, arching down through them like a spear, he plunged down through the funnel's stem leading to Hell's ninth circle.

Quite different was the environment in the frozen valley at the bottom of the universe. Rubiconte swooped out into the gray twilit gloom over the giants whom Jove had immersed waist deep in ice along the fringe of that melancholy valley. Slowing his descent, the demon glided over the shades of traitors, purple with the cold, gripped fast below the surface of this eternally frozen pond, until he alighted before Lucifer.

Once the most beautiful of God's beings, his enormous feculent form was now clasped unmercifully at mid breast by an immense fist of ice. He had three heads: a red one in front, and two more were joined together with the first above the forehead, one whitish yellow, and the other black. A set of bat-like wings flapped beneath each chin, blowing forth the winds that kept this region frozen. Held fast in the grip of each mouth was a sinner: Judas Iscariot, held head first, then Brutus and Cassius, the flesh of each ripped, rent and flayed by claw-like teeth.

Rubiconte was never completely certain where he should stand when in Lucifer's three-faced presence. But since his master towered over him, he really could not make eye contact anyway.

"Locked in this glacial landscape, I suffer as deeply as do the souls cast into this mephitic realm," Satan said to him. "I have no access as I formerly did, to the love of God. Yet, I do recall something of his patterns of thought: existing outside of time creates certain

predictability. For my intellectual entertainment, I still have a few past-times, to create a welcome if brief distraction from my inexorable predicament.”

Hearing this familiar discourse, Rubiconte’s body sagged.

“Qualifying souls for eternity in Hell is something that usually takes care of itself,” Lucifer continued. “Iniquitous souls fall of their own accord like a polluted rain of fat, gray droplets, so heavy is the weight of their sins. But there is the odd case where some contest can be indulged. God also finds these occasional battles a welcome relief from the din raised by the enthusiastic exclamations of gratitude and praise issuing from the sycophantic saved. He often wishes that he had decided to put all flatterers in Hell, rather than just the false ones.”

Lucifer’s speech halted, Rubiconte straightened his body, while keeping his half shut eyes fixed at the place where his master’s form merged with the ice. In spite of himself, a low howl softly reverberated in the back of his throat.

Lucifer then said, “Rubiconte, I want you to enter the world of the living and take possession of a soul teetering on the edge. Let’s see whether God bothers to take a hand in the outcome.”

Instantaneously, the demon soared invisibly out of Hell’s depths, bursting into the bright blueness of a mid summer day in Italy. The sun hung in that sky like a lustrous pearl set by the hand of a master jeweller. His target was a simple old priest who tended the small flock of an isolated mountain village named Pecorino. Through no fault other than living at the edge of civilization, the unfortunate villagers resembled the sheep so closely associated with their village. From the clear air above, the demon spied his target, a certain Bobino, shambling along a narrow path winding its way

among the stone and thatch huts of Pecorino accompanied by a beautiful and still innocent young woman.

Rubiconte expanded his magnificent form to its fullest before diving towards the priest. Should he attempt a rear entry? No, that would not only be unpleasant for him but the man's reaction could alert the woman to his arrival. The demon decided to enter through the eyes, even though that would require a slight materialization. Inwardly he cringed at the thought of squeezing, once again, into a human form.

Father Bobino stiffly swung one thick leg in front of the other, swaying from side to side as he lifted his sandals. Somehow, he managed to keep abreast of his attractive, young companion. The man was short and squat, as indeed were most of his people. Indeed so thoroughly mixed and remixed were the products of this very limited gene pool that, beyond the bloom of youth, it was nearly impossible to distinguish the men from the women!

Bobino's unkempt hair and beard were long and gray, sprouting at incongruous angles around a large bony forehead and a narrow triangular chin. His eyes were bleary, and of no determinable color. His expression reflected a dull stupidity; of temperament, he was extremely obdurate. Like many men of the cloth, he could not fully suppress the desire to despoil the nearest female, to grind a handful of herbs, as it were, with his pestle in her mortar. Thus he was well qualified to play the goat to the village sheep. Nevertheless, he remained free of actually committing this or any other sin. The good father did not clutter his mind with other desires save a second contrasting obsession: a deep and chaste love of the Virgin Mary.

Young, dark-eyed Matilda, found herself accompanying the priest by accident. She had been cautioned from early girlhood against finding herself alone in any surroundings with a man, but especially with a man of the cloth. Safe in public, though, she recalled her mother's injunction to

avoid in particular the dilapidated local chapel, unless accompanied by a male relative. Its holy walls had too often offered the opposite of sanctuary. At fifteen she was just entering her prime on the local marriage market. Walking alongside Bobino, she glimpsed what seemed like ripples of heat near his head but nothing else. Thus did the demon take possession of the rustic priest!

Once inside the foul human bag of bones, fluids, and slimy sinews, Rubiconte stretched out, taking over his victim's motions and his mind like a hand sliding into a glove. The demon stopped before revealing himself through the priest's eyes, and allowed Bobino's thoughts to continue so he could inventory them. After a few seconds, he discovered his host's two obsessions.

Turning to the girl, he saw her gazing at the middle of his body. He felt an unfamiliar warmth and looked down at a protuberance in his well worn priestly robe, as though some impish prankster had secretly inserted a cloths peg between his legs. Matilda's face reddened, and she scampered away from the holy man. The devil swung the priest's body into the nearby chapel and shut the wooden door with a loud thud!

Rubiconte looked about the dimly lit interior of the stonewalled chapel. His throat caught on the dust that he had inhaled along with the air. Wiping the tears from his eyes, he saw before him a few rows of frail wooden benches, upon which the faithful precariously balanced their rear ends during services.

At the front of the chapel beneath a small round parchment window was a rough stone altar with a plain cross. A few beams of light, weakened by their passage, stole through the parchment to the altar. To the right was a stone basin for baptisms. The ceiling was constructed of roughhewn timbers laid across a central beam. To the left of the window, a frayed rope hung down from the bell tower above to call the faithful to mass. In a corner near the rope was a small well used to fill the baptismal basin. The only ornament in the chapel was a panel portrait of the Virgin and Child in the

Byzantine style. Although it had been there for so long that no one could remember how it had come to grace the church, it was the community's prize possession and Bobino's object of single-minded devotion.

Feeling his second unfamiliar stirring that morning, Rubiconte stared at the Madonna. The delicate beauty of the portrait drew him closer. The Virgin cradled the golden holy infant in her arms, one long, thin hand firmly supporting him at the neck, his body resting securely in the curve of her left arm. Above the heads of mother and child, jeweled crowns were suspended. She was clad in a full-length hooded black gown, with a fringe of white damask edging the hood. Framed within the translucent fabric was the bronzed face of a dark-eyed girl. Looking directly at the viewer, her face bore the sweetest possible expression. She and the infant were posed against a golden background.

Rubiconte took a step backward, turned his head to the right, and contemptuously spat on the stone floor. Then a strange thing happened. Unable to stop himself, he turned back to focus on the girl's face. Mary's eyes had begun to shed actual tears! The demon galvanized Bobino's body to scramble out the chapel door and collapse against it, his chest heaving wildly. For a moment his snarling spirit had almost been submerged beneath golden waves of the sweetest tenderness. Did the piety of the rustic priest have the power to transform his demonic possessor?

Passers-by witnessed father Bobino fall to the ground in an apparent stupor. A small crowd formed; Matilda looked on safely from the back, her dark-eyes wide, wondering what would happen next. Abruptly, the priest sat upright and his suddenly clear eyes transfixed the girl. He clambered to his feet and went back inside the chapel, closing its door after him. One thought filled every mind: What had happened to Bobino?

The next day was Sunday. Uncharacteristically, the villagers hurried on their dusty feet to answer the thin call of the chapel's bell. As they seated themselves, the parishioners could hardly

believe their eyes. The priest had washed and combed his hair and beard, and his robes, though worn nearly through in several places, were clean for the first time in a generation.

During the mass, Bobino's Latin diction was perfect, although he recited it in reverse. All that the ignorant villagers noticed was that, whatever he was saying, he spoke clearly. At the conclusion, the astonished flock passed out into the morning sunlight. One said to the person beside him that Bobino looked and spoke like a bishop, but was quickly reminded that they had never seen a bishop.

Meanwhile, the priest approached Matilda and her parents. Addressing the girl in a clear and cultivated tone, he asked if she would return that evening after dinner to discuss an important matter with him and a few others, who wanted to find a way of raising money to purchase a frame for the panel portrait of the Madonna. The girl was so astounded that she agreed before her parents could stop her. Instead, she walked away from the church with one impression: Bobino's eyes, framed by the friendliest of expressions, were, however, a deep black flecked with yellow!

With the chapel emptied of its dumbfounded congregation, the new Bobino folded his arms across his chest and raised a hand to his bearded chin. He laughed out loud. That night the possessed priest would fulfill his carnal desire, while his beloved, Virgin looked on. Then he would carry his soul off to Hell's first ring to join the shades of those who had likewise given in to illicit sexual indulgences.

Matilda returned with her parents to their poor hut. Her mother and father forbid her to return alone to the chapel. Cleaned up or not, the priest could not be trusted alone with their young daughter!. But, Matilda, her natural good sense returned to her, understood this better than anyone. She recalled how the previous day, she had observed Father Bobino erect his tower. The priest's intentions were all too clear; she must devise a plan to keep his sword in its scabbard.

After some time lost in thought, Matilda drew her mother aside. At the conclusion she said, “We will enjoy the last laugh on this fool who thinks that he can so easily take my honor.”

That evening, Rubicone awaited the girl’s return to the chapel. High in the mountains the night was dark and cool. He had lit a small candle and placed it near the portrait of the Virgin. Looking through a crack in the door, he saw Matilda approaching. The pale moon stretched her shadow toward the waiting demon.

As the girl entered the church, she looked about and, pretending surprise, said, “Why Father Bobino, where are the others that you said would be here?”

“Don’t worry, Matilda, you are just a bit early.” the demon-possessed priest replied.

Bobino then began to speak soothingly, preferring the time-honored practice of clerical seduction to force.

Matilda relaxed and appeared in the dim light to smile. Inside the priest, Rubicone swelled in confidence. Over his shoulder the Madonna gazed impassively upon them. Bobino now spoke in the most flattering manner, praising her beauty: her lustrous dark eyes; her soft supple skin; her sweet red lips. Finally, having inflamed himself more than he could bear, he reached for her breasts. The girl playfully slipped away from him, taking a scarf from around her neck.

“I cannot help but consent,” she said. “You have become such a cultivated gentleman! But I must first blindfold you with this scarf. You can have me but you will have to catch your prize.”

“Very well,” Rubicone replied. the priest, “A good chase increases the passions.”

Matilda drew the scarf around his head and over his eyes, tying it firmly in the back of his head. The demon was enclosed in blackness deeper than a starless night, darker than the passage to Hell. The girl danced away from him to the wall opposite the altar.

“Here I am. Come catch me!” she called

Following the sound of her voice, Bobino stretched out his arms, lurching into the altar.

“How clumsy you are, and what a noise you make,” the girl laughed.

Blood boiling, the demon replied, “I am not as agile as I once was. Have mercy and don’t move so quickly.”

Matilda slipped across the chapel to the well, and called again:” I am over here now.”

“Enough of this game!” cried the demon and sprang towards the sound of her voice. Tripping over one of the benches, he grabbed the bell rope to regain his balance. As the bell rang out in the night, Rubiconte heard roars of laughter outside of the church. Matilda’s mother and father had gone hut to hut gathering the villagers to witness their daughter’s escape.

“Listen to the goat clanging his bell,” someone shouted.

Surprised, the priest let go of the rope, staggered two steps and fell into the well! Matilda threw open the chapel doors and ran outside to more waves of raucous laughter. Nearly drowned by the baptismal water, the demon spurted out of Bobino’s rectum, his plan foiled by his intended prey. The miserable priest dragged his wet, bedraggled form from the well, and onto the chapel steps.

”Look, here comes the bishop of Pecorino!” Matilda cried.

The crowd roared louder than ever! Mortified before his congregation, chilled to the bone, the old man stumbled off to his bed, where in less than a week he gave up the ghost.

But, do not feel sorry for him, for the old priest died sinless! His soul ascended to God’s glorious heaven, where he quietly worships the Virgin, immersed not in water but in a sea of her tender love. As for Rubiconte, if there is a deeper circle of Hell, Satan will find it for him.