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ANECDOTE FOR A WINTER NIGHT

By Burton Rascoe

It was after midnight and two novelists, a poet, and three women, were leaning over a table that held a decanter and glasses of cheap home-made wine in an Italian restaurant near Washington Square, and listening to a pulpy, flaccid-faced, middle-aged man in a skull-cap and shabby clothes who was expounding an evil and revolting doctrine.

He had made a pact with the Devil, he said, and the Devil was his master, a benevolent master who had granted him happiness. At this, each of his auditors silently wondered wherein the source of this creature's happiness lay; for to all appearances he was degraded and miserable; but they allowed him to proceed without voicing their skepticism. In signing the pact, he said, he had released himself from the duties and obligations that men and women ordinarily feel toward one another. His own motto, he said, was from the Abbey of Thélème: "Do What Thou Wilt." And he added solemnly, "That is the whole of the law."

He had, he said, officiated at the Black Mass, attended Sabbats of witches and warlocks, and had materialized the Devil.

As he spoke in his confident and droning voice his bewildered and half-terrorized auditors began subconsciously to fear some imminent calamitous punishment for the sinister blasphemies issuing from the mouth of this sinister and corrupt débris of a man. Little, pig eyes, he had, coal black, set in flabby sockets of corpse-white skin; but the eyes had frightening animation.

When he said he had materialized the Devil, the poet asked nervously, "Could you materialize the Devil now?"

The demonologist answered that he could and he would. He could make the Devil appear before their eyes and prance

about on the floor. But first he would have to have the proper accessories for this feat. He knew the incantations to utter; but he needed two swords, a black cat, a willow wand, and some special incense.

The poet said he knew where he could get two swords. One of the women said she could furnish the black cat. The demonologist said he had plenty of the incense so there was no need to worry about that. But where was one to get a willow wand? The demonologist bethought himself that there were willows in Central Park. One of the novelists volunteered to get the willow wand, while the poet was fetching the swords and the woman her black cat.

They all met by agreement about an hour later in the apartment of the novelist who lived near the restaurant. The novelist who had gone after the willow wand was the last to appear. He had found great difficulty in locating a willow tree, he said.

The demonologist lighted the incense in small braziers and set about making elaborate preparations. His auditors sat about on the floor in the dimly lighted room, scarcely breathing in their fear and feverish curiosity. The demonologist at length began his incantations, a weird and profane litany to Satan. His eyes became glazed. He held the cat pinioned tightly against the table, and with a long needle drew some blood from the cat's belly. The meowed frightfully.

Unperturbed by the animal's suffering, he mixed some chemical in a brass bowl and a blue flame sputtered and shot upward, culminating in an acrid smoke. He grasped the wand, which he had peeled and anointed and made some passes with it, like a magician, and called upon the Devil in Greek to manifest himself.

Nothing happened. The demonologist seemed puzzled and surprised. Disappointment overcast the faces of his audience. The demonologist examined the wand. "This is not willow," he said, "it is from a beech sapling."

The novelist who had brought the wand was chagrined, for he had often mentioned trees by name in descriptive scenes in his books and prided himself on the literal exactitude of his details; but he offered immediately to take a taxi and a competent judge of trees and bring back a proper branch. One of the women said that she knew a willow when she saw one and volunteered to go with him.

The others sat around waiting for the willow wand and in time it appeared. The demonologist looked it over carefully,

gave a grunt of satisfaction and peeled it. Then he set about making his incantations again. The auditors, tense and cramped in their postures and jumpy from their long expectancy were almost at the bursting point of hysteria as the mysteries proceeded. Just as the demonologist reached the stage of the blue flame and was about to invoke the Devil, the blackness outside was suddenly transformed into luminous grayness. A cock, from God knows where, crew.

The demonologist dropped his arms in the midst of waving the wand. On his face was registered, whether assumed or real, an expression of defeat and anger. "It is no use." He said. "Dawn has just broken. Magic is ineffectual after cock-crow. At the streak of dawn the utility of the incantation is negated. Give me a drink somebody!"

One of the novelists was Theodore Dreiser. One was Louis U. Wilkinson. The poet was Harry Kemp. The demonologist was Aleister Crowley.