

*Chapter 8: When Lucrezia  
Served Mushrooms*

**A**DAM, who had managed to slip out of the house without being seen, happened to meet Satan just as he reached the corner.

"Hello," he said. "Anything wrong? You seem depressed."

"Tired, that's all." Satan chewed nervously for a moment on his large black cigar. "Had a hard day. Here it is eight o'clock and I'm only just leaving the office. An hour off for dinner and I'm back again for the evening session. If you think running Hell is an easy job just try it for a while. I'm worn out."

"But—why overwork yourself?"

"My dear fellow—how can I help it? The place has never been so popular. The war started matters. And since the United States got rid of the saloon and took to serious drink-

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ing our weekly arrivals have just about doubled. No wonder I'm overworked."

"Still, I imagine you're not complaining about it."

"Naturally not. I take a pride in my success. Think of it—four palatial new twin-screw boats on the Styx ferry since the first of the year! How's that for a record? But just the same, eighteen hours' hard work a day does take it out of a fellow, especially when he isn't as young as he used to be. Where are *you* bound? I thought Eve wouldn't let you out, nights."

"She won't, as a rule. But ever since she became interested in this club of hers I've been sure of one evening off a month, at least. While she and her friends are telling each other about their love affairs, I walk out."

"Up to your old tricks, I see," Satan laughed. "Incorrigible!"

Adam regarded His Majesty sourly, an injured expression on his face.

"Can't you stop reminding me of that Garden of Eden affair?" he grumbled. "I'm sick of it. Why should I be made the goat for everybody else's sins? Why should I have to pay with

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six thousand years of hard labor for something the rest of mankind can find free on any street corner for the asking? It isn't right. No wonder I feel like breaking loose every once in a while, if only to get a change of air—hot air." He looked supremely disgusted.

"I quite understand your position," replied Satan, with a sardonic smile. "All married men feel the same way. Personally I do not blame them. No one wants to sit through the same show seven nights in the week. But, officially speaking, permit me to remind you that whether you like it or not you are the first original sinner—Hell's horrible example, as it were—and I expect you to live up to the part. If you don't—" He paused significantly.

"All right—all right," Adam muttered. "But just the same it isn't fair."

"You long term prisoners," Satan went on, "have gotten through with the worst of your punishments. The first thousand years are always the hardest. But just because I've let up on you a little don't forget what you are here for. Hell is no pleasure resort. And to impress that fact on your mind I think I shall order hot

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vinegar baths for you, every Saturday night, for the next year or two. They're tremendously stimulating—I may even say uplifting——”

“Now, Your Majesty,” Adam objected, but the expression on Satan's face suddenly stopped him.

“As for that club of your wife's, she'd better not forget what I told her. She and her friends can do all the talking they please, in private, but the moment I hear of any attempts to criticize my administration in public, there will be trouble.”

“I'll tell her,” Adam said, his teeth chattering. Satan was certainly in a very bad humor.

“I do not wish to seem unreasonable,” His Majesty went on, “but I must uphold the dignity of the constitution, and the Books of Moses, on which it is based. In such matters I am a strict fundamentalist. I show no mercy to anarchists, either political or religious. You have no idea what I'm up against.”

“I can imagine,” Adam said soothingly.

“Only this morning I had a couple of new arrivals before me for examination,” Satan continued. “One, a young Russian accused of an illicit love affair with a peasant girl had the im-

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puddence to say he didn't believe in marriage, and that it was absurd to punish a man for doing his biological duty! Incredible—such defiance of well-established moral law! What is the world coming to?"

"God knows," muttered Adam, who was eager to get away.

"The other," Satan went on, "who had served in the United States Marine Corps and been hung for killing his wife's lover declared he couldn't see any difference between shooting a man down with an automatic in Philadelphia, and doing the same thing with a machine gun, in Nicaragua! If one was murder, so was the other! I was obliged to give them both six months on the electric grill, just to bring them to a more reasonable way of thinking." He paused as he saw Eve drive up in her new refrigerated roadster.

"Hello!" she cried, gayly waving her hand. "Can I take you anywhere? I'm on my way to Lucrezia Borgia's for our club meeting." She glanced rather cynically at Adam. "So you have escaped again, have you? Well, old dear, if you get into any trouble don't try to crawl out

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of it by saying the woman tempted you, the way you did with me in the Garden——”

“Applesauce!” Adam exclaimed, and strode off in the darkness.

Eve smiled and went on. She was still smiling when she drove up to the gates of Lucrezia’s elaborate Renaissance palace.

The formal gardens were gay with colored lanterns, and from a small pavilion at the edge of the miniature lake came those exquisite jungle harmonies for which the Royal Red-Hot Jazz Band was so justly celebrated throughout Hell’s fashionable high-brown section.

“Music like that,” Cleopatra murmured, “always makes me feel so deliciously unexpurgated. My private orchestra was playing just such an air the night Antony and I met. He dropped in to spend the evening and stayed ten years.”

“With a wife in Rome, too,” remarked Mrs. Potiphar. “I don’t see how he got away with it.”

“Oh—a man like Antony could get away with murder.”

“It has been my experience,” said Mrs. Potiphar cynically, “that a great many people

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who think they are getting away with murder are only committing suicide. He killed himself, didn't he?"

"What of it? He gambled—and lost. Any person with spirit should be willing to take a chance. And that reminds me that I took one myself, to-day—on a tiger-skin rug——"

"My *dear!*" exclaimed Mrs. Potiphar.

"In a raffle, my love. At Cæsar's house. The poor fellow has spent so much money on that Follies girl he met last year that he's been obliged to dispose of his most prized possessions. I *do* hope I win the thing. It has certain associations. Hello, Salome, dear. May I have one of your cigarettes?"

"Help yourself." The lady from Antioch extended her handsome jeweled case. "How about you, Mrs. Potiphar."

"No, thanks," the friend of Joseph sniffed. "I never smoke."

"I can remember the time when you *did,*" observed Salome spitefully. "And if you don't think that's a hot one, just try it on your radiator!"

"Order, please," Eve said, taking the chair.

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“Before we go ahead I wish to announce that next Saturday night the Sultan of Turkey is giving a dance——”

“May I make a motion?” asked Salome.

“At the proper time, my love,” Eve remarked, smiling. “We are all invited. What I wished to say, when I was interrupted, is that His Highness wants us all to appear in oriental costume, so you girls had better look around and find something to wear. Now, Lucrezia, darling, we are ready to hear from you.”

The Lady of the Poisons seemed rather nervous as she faced her little audience.

“Before I go ahead,” she murmured, “I want you all to understand that I really am a much abused woman. A great many very cruel things have been said about me, in history, but among my intimates my tender-heartedness was never questioned. Or even mentioned. In spite of my peculiarities my friends were all very loyal to me. It was my enemies who were forever blackening my reputation by their untimely deaths.

“Some people seem to think that I was a bloodthirsty creature who went about putting Paris green in my guests’ salad dressings just



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to give them a finishing touch. Paris green indeed! A child could have detected it. I trust you will not think me capable of anything so *gauche*.

“But I admit that there have been times in my career when I was obliged to employ rather drastic measures. One cannot always act with finesse.

“Take the case of my third mother-in-law, for example. I am not vindictive, and I cheerfully pass over the fact that three mothers-in-law are too many for any young girl to have. But when I had finally succeeded in having my husband Alphonse safely locked up in the family burying vault from ptomaine poisoning I confess I did not anticipate that his mother would insist upon coming to live with me. I have never found in-laws much of a joy.

“Still, I tried to be patient. When she insisted on telling me, night after night, about her appendix operation, I smiled. When she criticized my housekeeping, and discharged the cook, I smiled some more. But when she took to eating her spaghetti with a soup spoon I knew her time had come. It was too painful a

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sight and I had to think of the children. That night, as she started on her operation story for the three hundred and twentieth time I was obliged to shut her up. In the folding bed. There was nothing else to do."

"It seems to me," the Queen of Sheba laughed, "that you were not entirely without justification, although, never having had a mother-in-law myself I cannot speak from experience. What I do not see is, why, with your romantic nature, you married so often."

"Well," Lucrezia smiled, "I'm rather domestic, and romance is after all quite a strain on the nervous system, so every once in a while I felt it necessary to settle down, as it were, and straighten out my affairs.

"There was the time I married Giovanni, for instance. He was my second husband, you know. A dear fellow. The only man I really ever loved. One of the only men, at least. We had our little tiffs, of course. What married couple hasn't? When a husband and wife can't find any more things to quarrel over they are through, and might as well part. Giovanni and I used to fight about the silliest trifles. I re-



*"My second husband was always dashing off somewhere and leaving me at home," said Lucrezia Borgia.*

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member a dreadful argument we once had over a carving knife. He said it was too dull to cut the roast. Of course I had to prove him in the wrong. I thought seriously of divorcing him for cruelty, when he had recovered, but we made it up. It wasn't until he began to snore in his sleep that I took to kissing him good-by, mornings.

"Still, I did not act hastily. Husbands are expensive, and being by nature economical I tried my best to make Giovanni do for another season. But it was hopeless. The poor fellow was quite worn out. So I had a talk with our family druggist.

"'Here is a little medicine, darling,' I said to my husband that night, 'which the doctor assures me will permanently cure you of your very bad habit of snoring.'

"'I am convinced I shall never snore again,' he smiled, drinking it off. 'When you put them to sleep, my angel love, they stay asleep.' Poor Giovanni. He would have his little jest, to the last. Well, there's a divinity that shapes our ends, I suppose. He always called me his divine Lucrezia.

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“He never held what happened against me. Our quarrel, you might say, went no further. I see him here often and we are the best of friends.

“Husbands are always a trial, of course. But my greatest cross, I think, was my Uncle Rodolpho. He belonged to the less prominent or Bologna branch of our family, and while he worked hard at his profession, which was that of a winetaster, he never seemed to make a financial success of it. His wife, Isabella, collected book plates. I thought it rather a foolish hobby until I began to miss so many of my expensive first editions.

“Uncle Rodolpho and his wife had eleven children, and every summer, when the wine-tasting business was dull, they would bring the eleven little darlings to make me a visit. They did not think of waiting to be asked—such formalities Uncle Rodolpho declared were unnecessary, so far as he was concerned. He disliked all ceremony, he said, and wanted me to feel, the moment he arrived, that he looked on the place as his own.

“I stood it for three years without complain-

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ing. When they turned up for their fourth visit my nerves were somewhat on edge. It was just after Giovanni had snored his last.

“‘I haven’t seen your husband about, my dear,’ Aunt Isabella remarked during supper the first night, by way of making conversation.

“‘Neither have I, my love,’ I replied, trying to keep my temper.

“‘Where is he?’ she went on, with an insinuating smile.

“‘How in Hades should I know, darling,’ I said, toying with the bread knife. I think she took the hint, for she didn’t pursue the subject.

“I saw very little of Uncle Rodolpho during that visit. He was in training for the annual Winetasters’ Tournament to be held in Rome that autumn, he said, and spent most of his time in the cellar.

“But the rest of the family amply made up for his absence. It was impossible to get rid of them. The eleven little cherubs were all over the place, picking the fruit, digging holes in the flower beds, throwing stones at the pigeons, breaking down the shrubbery. And you should have seen them eat. Anyone might have sup-

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posed that they'd never had a real meal in their lives. Imagine being forced to listen to thirteen assorted Borgias, imbibing their soup in thirteen different keys! It was too much of a strain. My system wouldn't stand it. No wonder I was on the verge of a nervous collapse.

"I tried to be patient, but they finally broke my spirit. One morning Paul and Pietro, the cherubic twins, caught half a dozen eels in the lily pond and put them in my bath. By the time I had recovered from that and was trying to revive my spirits with a glass of brandy, I smelt smoke, and found dear Salvatore and his sister Julia playing African barbarians around a camp-fire in the middle of my best Persian rug. They had killed poor Beppo, my favorite parrot, and were roasting him over the coals. I went into the garden, for air, and discovered Antonio and Lorenzo shooting arrows at a pig they had tied to a tree. Already he looked like a porcupine. I went to Uncle Rodolpho, in the cellar.

"These outrages," I said, "must stop!"

"He interrupted his winetasting exercises for a moment and stared at me with a silly smile.

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“‘Pshaw,’ he muttered. ‘Boys will be boys. Don’t forget you were a child yourself, once.’

“‘I went to my room and prayed.

“‘My God,’ I said, ‘make me a child again just for to-night. Then I may possibly be able to think of some torture devilish enough to suit them.’

“‘But the last straw was supplied by Uncle Rodolpho himself.

“‘Darling,’ he announced as he watched me gather up the pieces of a Florentine mirror which Angelino had just broken, ‘you seem depressed, but do not worry. I have a surprise for you. The children and I have formed a family orchestra and, while our execution may not be everything one could wish, we have decided to give you a concert, thinking that a little music may cheer you up.’

“‘After listening to two selections I staggered out.

“‘Your execution,’ I said to Uncle Rodolpho as I passed him at the door, ‘is all that anyone could possibly desire. To-night we shall have mushrooms for supper.’

“‘Uncle Rodolpho adored mushrooms. In



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fact he was quite an expert and knew all the poisonous kinds. So I sent the servants out and had them gather a bushel or more—everything in sight.

“‘Here, uncle,’ I said. ‘You know all about mushrooms. Pick out the ones that are good.’”

“‘He did. I threw all the good ones away and cooked the rest for supper.’”

“‘As Aunt Isabella and the children slipped quietly under the table I glanced at Uncle Rodolpho.’”

“‘I hope there is nothing wrong with these mushrooms, darling,’ I remarked pleasantly. ‘Don’t forget that you selected them yourself.’”

“‘True,’ he said, turning rather pale, ‘but I admit I made one mistake. I should also have selected the cook.’”

“‘When the neighbors commented on the size of the funeral I merely laughed.’”

“‘We Borgias,’ I said, ‘never do things by halves. Even in funerals it pays to secure club rates.’”

“‘I was glad to see the last of Uncle Rodolpho. He was always complaining that the world had no opening for him. The one I provided

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may have been a trifle narrow, but it was amply deep.

"There was an inquest, of course, but when I asked the officials to stay for luncheon they brought in a verdict of accidental homicide and went away so quickly that you might have supposed poor uncle Rodolpho and family had died of smallpox." She paused, as a member of the Pluto Postal Service swept noiselessly down to the lawn.

"Just in with a batch of official mail from the Upper Regions, ma'am," he whispered, handing Lucrezia a letter. A certain personage at the Gates asked me to give you this."

"It's from my father, girls," said Lucrezia, as she opened the message. "I'll read it.

"Have seen Smith, the American aviator. Understand he got into Heaven on the strength of his war record. He says he likes it here very much on account of the flying but still loves Marie and hopes she will be able to get a pardon and join him. I hear he has been seen going about a great deal with a red-headed young angel named Sallie but his interest is doubtless platonic. Affectionately, Papa.'"

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“Good!” Eve exclaimed. “Now we can get up that petition to the Throne. Will you attend to it, Sappho dear. Just say the girl’s misstep was the result of her love for the young man and that he is now ready to do the proper thing and marry her. If God is willing to let bygones be bygones, I don’t see why Satan should object.”

Sappho made a few rapid notes.

“For our next meeting, I have selected Delilah as the speaker of the evening,” the First Lady of Hades went on. “Can we count on you, dearie?”

“I suppose so,” replied Delilah, tossing away her cigarette. “My affair with Samson had its humorous moments. His wife blamed me for what happened to him, of course, and before the argument was over Samson wasn’t the only one who lost a lot of hair. Tell me about these professional strong men. I never saw one yet I couldn’t twist around my little finger.”