

HELL HATH NO FURY

JOHN COLLIER

The figures of mythology who featured in Lord Dunsany's ground-breaking tales were evolved a step further by John Collier, the English-born writer whom some critics have described as the heir to the eccentric Irishman's mantle. Collier, however, was more intrigued by figures of evil, such as the devil and his fiendish henchmen and women, though he treated all with a sardonic wit. A collection of such stories, Fancies and Goodnights, won him the very first International Fantasy Award in 1952. Other tales by Collier of the same kind had already been collected as Green Thoughts (1932) and The Devil and All (1935), and a full-length novel, His Monkey Wife (1930), was hailed by Anthony Burgess as 'a minor classic'. When this story of an expatriate explorer who returns to America with his clever chimpanzee, Emily, who tricks him into marriage, was first published in the USA, it raised a storm of controversy and was in danger of being banned in certain states! After the furore had died down, however, more objective voices declared that the work was actually an allegory of twentieth-century man's need to be reconciled with wild nature—although it can equally be appreciated as a comic jeu d'esprit typical of both its time and its author.

Although John Collier (1901-1980) spent the early years of his life in England, in the mid-Thirties he settled in America where he earned his living writing Hollywood screenplays for such distinguished pictures as George Cukor's Sylvia Scarlett (1935), The African Queen directed by John Huston from C. S. Forester's novel (1952), and I Am a Camera produced by Henry Cornelius in 1955. However, he never lost his love of writing the kind of comic fantasies that had brought him to public attention—in particular those in which devils and demons intruded into the affairs of humanity. Frequently anthologised examples of these are 'Thus I Refute Beelzy' about the fate suffered by those who do not believe in a little boy's invisible playmate, and 'The Bottle Party' about the comic escapades of a genie who always gets his own way. 'Hell Hath No Fury' is in the same tradition, but is less well known. It was among the collection of stories which won that prestigious fantasy award, so confirming the permanent place of comic fantasy in modern literature.

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As soon as Einstein declared that space was finite, the price of building sites, both in Heaven and Hell, soared outrageously. A number of petty fiends who had been living in snug squalor in the remoter infernal provinces, found themselves evicted from their sorry shacks, and had not the wherewithal to buy fresh plots at the new prices. There was nothing for it but to emigrate: they scattered themselves over the various habitable planets of our universe; one of them arrived in London at about the hour of midnight in the October of last year.

Some angels in like case took similar measures, and by a coincidence one of them descended at the same hour into the same northern suburb.

Beings of this order, when they take on the appearance of humans, have the privilege of assuming whichever sex they choose. Things being as they are, and both angels and devils knowing very well what's what, both of them decided to become young women of about the age of twenty-one. The fiend, as soon as he touched earth, was no other than Bella Kimberly, a brunette, and the angel became the equally beautiful Eva Anderson, a blonde.

By the essential limitation of their natures, it is impossible for an angel to recognise fiendishness on beholding it, and equally so for a fiend even to conceive the existence of angelic virtue. As a matter of fact, at such a meeting as now took place at Lowndes Crescent, St John's Wood, the angel is innocently attracted by what seems to her the superior strength and intensity of the fiendish nature, while the devil experiences that delicious interest that one feels in a lamb cutlet odorous upon the grill.

The two girls accosted one another, and each asked if the other knew of a suitable lodging-house in the neighbourhood. The similarity of their need caused them first to laugh heartily, and then to agree to become room-mates and companions of fortune. Bella suggested that it was perhaps too late to make respectable application for a lodging, therefore they spent the night strolling on Hampstead Heath, talking of how they would earn their livings, and of what fun they would have together, and of love, and then of breakfast, which is not an unnatural sequel.

They had some poached eggs in the little Express Dairy in Heath Street, and afterwards found a pleasant room on the third floor of an apartment house in Upper Park Road. Then they went out in search of employment: Bella was soon taken on as a dancing instructress, and Eva, with a little more difficulty, secured a situation as harpist in a cinema orchestra.

Once they were settled thus, they began to enjoy themselves as girls do, chattering and giggling at all hours. It is true that some of the things Bella said made Eva blush from the crown of her head to the soles of her feet, but she already loved her dark friend, and found her daring humour quite irresistible. They made amicable division of the chest of drawers, and shared the same bed, which no one thought was extraordinary, nor would if they had known them in their true characters, for nothing is more common than to find a fiend and an angel between the same pair of sheets, and if it was otherwise life would be hellishly dull for some of us.

Now there was living in this apartment house a young man scarcely older than Bella and Eva, who was studying to become an architect, and who had never known love, nor been put off for long by any imitation. His name was Harry Pettigrew, and his hair was a very medium colour, neither too dark nor too fair.

His means were very limited, and his room was on the topmost floor, but not so far above that inhabited by the two girls but he could hear their delicious giggling at that still hour when he should have been at his latest studies. He longed to go down and tap at their door and ask them what the joke was, but he was too shy.

However, when three such young people are in the same house, it is not long before they become acquainted: on one occasion Bella forgot to lock the bathroom door, and the reason for this must have been that in Hell there are no baths, and hence no bathrooms, and consequently no bathroom doors.

It was a Sunday; the young man himself was descending in a dressing-gown: there was a delicious little *contretemps*, in which, fortunately, he saw no more than any decent young man would wish to see. All the same, he retreated in great confusion, for he had no notion of the wishes of decent young women. His confusion was so extreme, that he counted neither stairs nor landings in ascending, and, flinging open a door which he took to be his own, he discovered Eva in the third position of Muller's exercise for the abdominal muscles, and in nothing else at all.

Now angels, as every man knows, are, by virtue of their very innocence, or the simplicity of the celestial costume, sometimes far less conventionally modest than the squeakers of the darker sister-hood. Eva hastily but without panic threw a wrap about her shoulders: 'You look quite upset,' she said. 'There is no reason to be upset. Did you want anything?'

'No...' he said, '... I *did* not. In fact I came in by mistake. It is nice of you not to scream or be angry with me.'

They exchanged one or two more little civilities. In the end, Harry was emboldened to suggest a walk on the Heath. Before Eva could reply, Bella entered, and, not seeing him there, she burst out, with a giggle, 'Whatever do you think happened to *me*?' Then, catching sight of him, she subsided into a confusion doubly arch.

This took off a little from the exquisite naturalness of the other encounter, a service for which Harry was not as grateful as he might have been, had he known to what a quarter, and from what a quarter, his fancy was being inclined. The truth is, that where a fiend and an angel, both in female form, are seen by the same young man, in precisely the same illuminating circumstances, he will, fifty or fifty-five times out of a hundred, choose the angel, if he is a nice young man, and if he has time enough.

Therefore, when they were all three on Hampstead Heath that afternoon, Harry addressed Bella with very pleasant words, but with words only, while to Eva he accorded certain looks as well.

Bella was not very slow at putting two and two together. She had been looking forward to a long period of mortal sin with this attractive young man, and to flying off with his soul afterwards. The soul of an architect, especially if he is of strong Palladian tendencies, is well worth a handsome villa, standing in two or three acres of well-laid-out grounds, in the most desirable residential quarter of Hell. You imagine this homeless fiend's mortification, against which could have been measured the fury of the woman scorned, since they were here resident in the same anatomy.

She saw every day that Harry was growing fonder of her blonde companion, and conceived the idea of adding a fourth to their party, in the shape of a young man nearly as swarthy as herself, whom she had met at the dancing-hall, and with whom she was already quite sufficiently familiar.

She represented to him that Eva was likely to inherit a large sum of money. This, and her blonde locks and guileless air, were quite enough for Master Dago, and all he asked was opportunity to come at her.

'It's no good just trying to do the sheik,' said Bella, 'for she's already soft and soppy on Harry Pettigrew, who should be my boy friend by rights. What you

want, is to give him the idea she lets you: that'll make him sheer off quick enough, if I know his lordship.' It will be observed that Bella's speech was vulgar in the extreme: this is a very usual deficiency of fiends.

Her dancing-partner, whom she had made well acquainted with the stings of jealousy, soon found means to introduce them to Harry. For example, on one Sunday when they were all walking in the sylvan shades of Ken Wood, he had Bella fall behind with Harry on some pretext or other, and when he and Eva had gone ahead a turn or two of the winding pathway, he put his arm behind her, without touching her in the least (or he would have had a severe rebuke), but so that it should appear to Harry, when he rounded the bend, that his hastily withdrawn arm had been about her consenting waist.

Not only this, but he once or twice made a sudden movement, and appeared flustered, when Harry entered a room in which he and Eva had been left alone by his accomplice. He was not above making, when he heard his rival's step outside the door, a little kissing sound with his perjured lips. On one occasion, when Bella was away for the weekend, he went so far as to throw a sock in at Eva's window.

Here he overreached himself. Harry, returning with Eva from a walk, was so overcome by the sight of this sock that he could no longer suffer in silence, but, first of all asking (as it were carelessly) whose sock that could be, he soon burst out with all the accumulated suspicions of the past few weeks, and had the infinite pleasure of hearing them denied frankly, emphatically, unmistakably and, above all, angelically.

A pretty little scene ensued, in which they discovered that their love partook of the nature of perfection. In fact, the only attribute that was wanting was completeness, which is recognised as being an essential by many of the ancient philosophers, several of the fathers of the Church, and by all young lovers. It is the nature of men to strive after perfection, and of angels to attain it: our young pair were true to type, and, after a little amicable discussion, it was agreed that they should endeavour to realise perfection in Eva's room that very night, when all the house was asleep. If perfection itself is insufficient for the censorious, such are reminded that in Heaven there is no marrying or giving in marriage, and among architectural students very little.

Now it so happened that Bella had returned that very afternoon, and had gone into conference with her accomplice to devise some bold stroke by which they might each achieve their impatient ends. At last they agreed on the boldest of all: Bella that very night was to visit Harry in his bedroom, and the swarthy dancing-man was to play the Tarquin in Eva's.

That night, at about the middle hour, they repaired to Hampstead. It was as black as pitch, no moon, a mist over the stars; no lights in the lodgers' rooms, for they were all asleep; no light in Harry's, because he was not there; no light in Eva's, because he was.

Bella, not knowing this, goes up to the top, finds him absent, and gets into his bed by way of a little surprise for him when he returns.

The dancing-man, making his entry a little later, gropes his way up the stairs, and, stopping at Eva's door, hears a murmuring within, which is in fact our young pair expressing to one another their great admiration of the perfection of perfection. He concludes he is a flight too low, goes higher, opens the door of Harry's room,

and, all in the dark, seizes upon the waiting Bella, who, in high delight at his enthusiasm, lets down a losing battle in a very convincing way.

Several hours passed, in which the good enjoyed that happiness which is the reward of virtue, and the wicked that illusion of it that is the consolation of vice.

In the first grey of dawn, our good Harry made a very pretty speech of thanks to his charmer, in which he told her that she was an angel and had transported him to Heaven itself.

Bella and her companion, on the other hand, damned one another with more heat than grace. They were sufficiently realistic, however, to agree that a good illusion is better than nothing at all, and they resolved to perpetuate their error by seeking it in an eternity of darkneses, but at this, I believe, they were not particularly successful.