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 GEORGE MEREDITH

## Lucifer in Starlight

On a starred night Prince Lucifer uprose.  
 Tired of his dark dominion, swung the fiend  
 Above the rolling ball, in cloud part screened,  
 Where sinners hugged their specter of repose.  
 5 Poor prey to his hot fit of pride were those.  
 And now upon his western wing he leaned,  
 Now his huge bulk o'er Afric's sands careened,  
 Now the black planet shadowed Arctic snows.  
 Soaring through wider zones that pricked his scars<sup>1</sup>  
 10 With memory of the old revolt from Awe,  
 He reached a middle height, and at the stars,  
 Which are the brain of heaven, he looked, and sank.  
 Around the ancient track marched, rank on rank,  
 The army of unalterable law.

1883

*From Modern Love*

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This was the woman; what now of the man?<sup>1</sup>  
 But pass him. If he comes beneath a heel,  
 He shall be crushed until he cannot feel,  
 Or, being callous, haply till he can.  
 5 But he is nothing—nothing? Only mark  
 The rich light striking out from her on him!  
 Ha! what a sense it is when her eyes swim  
 Across the man she singles, leaving dark  
 All else! Lord God, who mad'st the thing so fair,  
 10 See that I am drawn to her even now!  
 It cannot be such harm on her cool brow  
 To put a kiss? Yet if I meet him there!  
 But she is mine! Ah, no! I know too well  
 I claim a star whose light is overcast:  
 15 I claim a phantom woman in the Past.  
 The hour has struck, though I heard not the bell!

1. The vast expanse of sky reminds Satan of the wounds he suffered when his revolt against God was crushed and he was hurled from heaven to hell.

1. I.e., a rival with whom the wife has fallen in love.

## 15

I think she sleeps: it must be sleep, when low  
 Hangs that abandoned arm toward the floor;  
 The face turned with it. Now make fast the door.  
 Sleep on: it is your husband, not your foe.  
 5 The Poet's black stage-lion<sup>2</sup> of wronged love  
 Frights not our modern dames—well if he did!  
 Now will I pour new light upon that lid,  
 Full-sloping like the breasts beneath. "Sweet dove,  
 Your sleep is pure. Nay, pardon: I disturb.  
 10 I do not? good!" Her waking infant-stare  
 Grows woman to the burden<sup>3</sup> my hands bear:  
 Her own handwriting to me when no curb  
 Was left on Passion's tongue. She trembles through;  
 A woman's tremble—the whole instrument—  
 15 I show another letter<sup>4</sup> lately sent.  
 The words are very like: the name is new.

## 16

In our old shipwrecked days there was an hour,  
 When in the firelight steadily aglow,  
 Joined slackly, we beheld the red chasm grow  
 Among the clicking coals. Our library bower  
 5 That eve was left to us: and hushed we sat  
 As lovers to whom Time is whispering.  
 From sudden-opened doors we heard them sing:  
 The nodding elders mixed good wine with chat.  
 Well knew we that Life's greatest treasure lay  
 10 With us, and of it was our talk. "Ah, yes!  
 Love dies!" I said: I never thought it less.  
 She yearned to me that sentence to unsay.  
 Then when the fire domed blackening, I found  
 Her cheek was salt against my kiss, and swift  
 15 Up the sharp scale of sobs her breast did lift—  
 Now am I haunted by that taste! that sound!

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'Tis Christmas weather, and a country house  
 Receives us: rooms are full: we can but get  
 An attic crib.<sup>5</sup> Such lovers will not fret  
 At that, it is half-said. The great carouse  
 5 Knocks hard upon the midnight's hollow door,  
 But when I knock at hers, I see the pit.  
 Why did I come here in that dullard fit?  
 I enter, and lie couched upon the floor.  
 Passing, I caught the coverlet's quick beat:

2. Probably a reference to Shakespeare's portrait of a jealous husband in *Othello*.

3. A letter once written by the wife to the husband.

4. A letter she has recently written to the man she now loves.

5. Small room.

10 Come, Shame, burn to my soul! and Pride, and Pain—  
 Foul demons that have tortured me, enchain!  
 Out in the freezing darkness the lambs bleat.  
 The small bird stiffens in the low starlight.  
 I know not how, but shuddering as I slept,  
 15 I dreamed a banished angel to me crept:  
 My feet were nourished on her breasts all night.

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It is no vulgar<sup>6</sup> nature I have wived.  
 Secretive, sensitive, she takes a wound  
 Deep to her soul, as if the sense had swooned,  
 And not a thought of vengeance had survived.  
 5 No confidences has she: but relief  
 Must come to one whose suffering is acute.  
 O have a care of natures that are mute!  
 They punish you in acts: their steps are brief.  
 What is she doing? What does she demand  
 10 From Providence or me? She is not one  
 Long to endure this torpidly, and shun  
 The drugs<sup>7</sup> that crowd about a woman's hand.  
 At Forfeits<sup>8</sup> during snow we played, and I  
 Must kiss her. "Well performed!" I said: then she:  
 15 " 'Tis hardly worth the money, you agree?"  
 Save her? What for? To act this wedded lie!

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I am to follow her.<sup>9</sup> There is much grace  
 In women when thus bent on martyrdom.  
 They think that dignity of soul may come,  
 Perchance, with dignity of body. Base!  
 5 But I was taken by that air of cold  
 And statuesque sedateness, when she said  
 "I'm going"; lit a taper, bowed her head,  
 And went, as with the stride of Pallas<sup>1</sup> bold.  
 Fleshly indifference horrible! The hands  
 10 Of Time now signal: O, she's safe from me!  
 Within those secret walls what do I see?  
 Where first she set the taper down she stands:  
 Not Pallas: Hebe shamed!<sup>2</sup> Thoughts black as death  
 Like a stirred pool in sunshine break. Her wrists  
 15 I catch: she faltering, as she half resists,  
 "You love . . . ? love . . . ? love . . . ?" all on an indrawn breath.

6. Coarse or insensitive.

7. I.e., poison to be used for suicide.

8. A parlor game. Any player who broke one of the rules had to deposit something with the judge (in this instance, money). To win back this "forfeit," the player had to perform some act, on the orders of the judge, that would amuse the other players.

9. In an attempt to restore the marriage, the couple has resolved to try resuming marital relations. The

experiment fails.

1. Pallas Athene, a goddess, usually pictured with the figure of a mature and powerful woman, bearing a shield and spear.

2. Hebe, goddess of youth and, for a time, cup-bearer to the gods. This office she gave up because of the shame she felt when she fell down while serving wine to the gods.

Mark where the pressing wind shoots javelinlike  
 Its skeleton shadow on broad-backed wave!  
 Here is a fitting spot to dig Love's grave;  
 Here where the ponderous breakers plunge and strike,  
 5 And dart their hissing tongues high up the sand:  
 In hearing of the ocean, and in sight  
 Of those ribbed wind-streaks running into white.  
 If I the death of Love had deeply planned,  
 I never could have made it half so sure,  
 10 As by the unblessed kisses which upbraid  
 The full-waked sense: or failing that, degrade!  
 'Tis morning; but no morning can restore  
 What we have forfeited. I see no sin:  
 The wrong is mixed. In tragic life, God wot,  
 15 No villain need be! Passions spin the plot:  
 We are betrayed by what is false within.

Their sense is with their senses all mixed in,  
 Destroyed by subtleties these women are!<sup>3</sup>  
 More brain, O Lord, more brain! or we shall mar  
 Utterly this fair garden we might win.  
 5 Behold! I looked for peace, and thought it near.  
 Our inmost hearts had opened, each to each.  
 We drank the pure daylight of honest speech.  
 Alas! that was the fatal draft, I fear.  
 For when of my lost Lady came the word,  
 10 This woman, O this agony of flesh!  
 Jealous devotion bade her break the mesh,  
 That I might seek that other like a bird.  
 I do adore the nobleness! despise  
 The act! She has gone forth, I know not where.  
 15 Will the hard world my sentience of her share?  
 I feel the truth; so let the world surmise.

1862

### Dirge in Woods

A wind sways the pines,  
 And below  
 Not a breath of wild air;  
 Still as the mosses that glow  
 5 On the flooring and over the lines

3. In a previous section, the couple had at last talked together about her affair and seemed reconciled. But when he discloses to her his own recent passing affair with a mistress (his "lost Lady," line 9),

his wife resolves to give him up to the mistress. Her resolve is a noble one but, in his view, without "sense" or "brain."

Of the roots here and there.  
The pine tree drops its dead;  
They are quiet, as under the sea.  
Overhead, overhead  
10 Rushes life in a race,  
As the clouds the clouds chase;  
    And we go,  
And we drop like the fruits of the tree,  
    Even we,  
15       Even so.