

A STRANGER IN THE SANCTUARY

by

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The priest was the first to see him. He had been planting tulips in his little garden behind the old church when a taxi stopped nearby and the stranger appeared. His attention had been drawn by the fact that the man refused to pay the fare and with one glance quieted the cabdriver who took off as if the devil were at his tail.

The stranger, wrapped in a long black overcoat out of fashion by at least half a century, walked up to the steps of the church and stopped to gaze at the architecture. The priest discreetly peered over the hedges and studied the intruder. The man wore a black hat and sunglasses even though it was an overcast day. What could be seen of his face was so thin as to be downright skeletal and his skin was as pale and haggard as living skin could get.

The stranger suddenly turned to the priest and smiled at him.

"Is this yours?" he asked, pointing to the church.

"Well...The parish's..." he responded as he stood up from behind the bushes, rather embarrassed.

"Is it open for visitations?"

The priest cleared his throat, feeling inexplicably nervous.

"There are no visiting hours per se, but you're welcome to go inside and see our sanctuary."

The stranger headed up the stairs and entered the old gothic church. Pulling off his muddy galoshes, the priest hurried to the back entrance. He found the stranger studying the stained-glass windows in the sanctuary. The man walked by the statues of the saints and approached the organ. He tapped the C chord.

"Nice sound."

The priest acknowledged the compliment, remaining by the altar as though protecting it. The visitor observed his reflection in the basin of holy water. He then dipped his finger into it and, sacrilege of sacrileges, tasted it. The priest coughed indignantly.

The man paid no attention to him and walked over to a large painting of Saint Michael standing over a vanquished demon.

"Who's the poor creature being stepped on?" he asked.

"Why, the devil, of course!" the priest responded with a touch of outrage.

"You mean...Satan?"

"Yes, Satan, Lucifer, Beelzebub..."

"Well, which one is it?"

"They are all the devil!"

The stranger lowered his dark glasses and peered over them. The priest blinked. He thought he detected a glow appearing behind the glasses.

"I would have imagined the devil to be much bigger than this painting suggests. He is, after all, the one and only antagonist to the Lord of Hosts."

"There are many different images of Satan."

"Do you mean to tell me that there is no official image?"

"Not really, no."

"Hasn't anyone ever seen him?" the stranger asked, approaching the priest.

"Well..."

"Have you seen him, my good man?"

"I've...I've felt his presence..."

"You mean he's still around? Didn't that saint destroy him?"

The priest rubbed the sweat from under his collar.

"He is forever present," the cleric stated in a quivering voice.

"Well then, what is the use of all these churches? I've counted sixty-five of them in this city alone."

"They protect us."

The stranger sat himself in the front pew. "I see...When people come in here, they're safe, is that it?"

"The devil is not present in the house of the Lord," the priest stated emphatically.

"And you sir, what are your duties here?" the man asked.

The priest leaned against the altar. "I perform masses...hear confessions..."

"Confessions?"

"Yes, people confess their sins to the Lord through me."

"Sins?"

"Deeds influenced by the devil," the priest said, losing his patience with the ignorance of the visitor. He figured the man must be a Protestant.

"But when they leave here, they fall once again prey to the evil one, right?"

"People have many weaknesses."

The stranger stood and walked up to the altar. He studied it carefully.

"This is where you perform the ceremonies. I like the set."

The priest's wrinkles hardened.

"Tell me, what happens to those who don't come in here?"

"I'm afraid they cannot be saved."

"Aaah..." The man stepped off the chancel, satisfied. "And what is that box over there?" he inquired.

"That box, as you call it, is the confessional." The priest was now turning red behind the ears with anger.

"May I look inside?"

The servant of the Almighty nodded, resigned to his new role as tour guide. The stranger knelt inside and closed the door behind him. "Kind of cramped in here, isn't it?" he called out.

The priest didn't have the strength to answer. The man peeked through the crack of the door.

"How do you know people aren't lying through their teeth when they talk to you in this booth?"

"That rests on their conscience."

"What conscience? If they had a conscience, they wouldn't have to cram themselves into this box, would they?"

The priest rolled his eyes up toward the heavens, hoping forgiveness would be bestowed on the man's lack of reverence.

"Say, would you hear my confession?"

The priest debated for an instant. Then, crossing himself, he entered the confessional. He seated himself, opened the shutter and waited. He thought he heard a snicker but assured himself that it was the old creaking wood. The stranger took a moment to reflect.

"I confess..."

The priest felt it necessary to interrupt him, for he was a firm believer in proper procedures. "You must say: Bless me, father, for I have sinned."

"That's not what I wish to confess."

"Oh?"

"I wish to confess that I am, rightly or wrongly, astounded by the utter stupidity of it all."

"I beg your pardon?"

"It's not fair play, you know. If human beings have such a base concept of piety, such a feeble understanding of the Eternal One, then my job is too easy."

"I'm afraid I don't understand," the old priest whispered, doing his best to

retain a pleasant composure.

"All these traditions and rituals go back to the Dark Ages and to pagan rites which the Romans incorporated into their version of the Faith. Why they hardly leave a clue for the struggling believer to find a road map to his soul. People are worse off then when they worshipped Nature directly from their hearts and instincts."

"People find faith and hope here!" the priest insisted, disgusted by the man's arrogance.

"I was really expecting that by the end of the twentieth century, human beings would have progressed spiritually to the point where the challenge would be more interesting for me. But as it is, it's all rather boring and old hat."

The priest peeked through the grill, wondering what he could do for this poor lunatic.

"On the other hand, I can't complain. I knew at the time of the Crusades that the Creator was in for some real disappointments. You've all played a great joke on the Uncreated One."

The priest smiled to himself. Why not go along with this queer bird, he thought to himself. "What joke is that, my son?"

"For awhile there, with Francis and the like, I figured you had caught on. But now...I almost feel sorry for you."

"Do you really?"

"Sounds funny, doesn't it? You know, when it all started out, with Moses seeing burning bushes, I thought I was up against something. But I had no idea how pathetic the human race is as a whole. Most of your wars aren't even my doing. And I certainly can't claim responsibility for your "religious" inquisitions. Who would have imagined that humans wanted to live in hell even before going there? I must admit, I'm disappointed. Nowadays I just sit around and watch the dreary show...You people don't need me around."

The priest shook his head. "Poor man," he thought to himself, "where did he come up with such crazy notions?" It was obvious that he had never been taken to Sunday School in his youth. The stranger came out of the box and

stretched his legs. The priest quickly followed after him, worried that he might have a seizure and break something.

"How did they get from the catacombs to this?" the visitor whispered to himself as he looked up at the gawdy decor.

"Don't you find solace in the house of the Lord, my son?" the priest asked out of long established habit.

The stranger turned to him and shook his head with a sarcastic grin.

"You're as lost as everyone else, old man. Haven't you figured out by now that you and that wrinkled up old body of yours are the *true* house of the Lord?"

With that, he walked off down the aisle. The priest sadly watched another wandering sheep leave the flock. The man stopped at the door. He turned back and smiled at the priest.

"Thanks for the visit. I see nothing has changed. That, at least, is comforting to an old devil!"