THE DEVIL-COMPACT IN TRADITION AND BELIEF

BY MAXIMILIAN RUDWIN

THE tradition of the devil-compact, which figures as an important factor in demonology, is of great antiquity.[1] This notion of a bargain with Beelzebub is of Oriental origin, and is traceable as far back as the Persian sacred writings. In the Zend-Avesta, Ahriman fails in his efforts to tempt Zoroaster. But Iblis has greater success in this direction. In the *Shah-Namch* of Firdusi,[2] this demon promises the Arabian prince Zohak to place him higher than the sun if he will sign a pact with him. The offer is accepted without much hesitation, and Iblis consecrates the pact by a kiss on both of Zohak's shoulders, from which spring forth two black serpents that no man can destroy. At last, the demon himself appears in the guise of a learned physician, and recommends that the serpents be given human brains to eat. Zohak kills his father and succeeds him on the throne, but he finally pays the penalty for the evil deeds committed by him with the demon's aid.

This Persian belief in a devil-compact forced its way into the religion of the Jews during the period of their Babylonian captivity under Zoroastrian rulers, and was transmitted by the Jews to the Christians.

The devil-compact is clearly mentioned in the book of Enoch, the Talmud and the Kabbala and is besides evident from a number of biblical passages. The temptation of Eve in Eden may perhaps be regarded as the first germ of this idea.[3] It is evident that the ac-

[1] The first attempt to treat this subject critically is J. A. Rinneberg's study *De pactis hominum cum diabolo* (17th century).

[2] Aboul-Casem or Abul Kasim Mansur, called also Ferdoussi, Ferdausi or Ferdusi, celebrated Persian epic poet, author of the *Shah-Namch* or *Book of Kings* (c. 941 - c. 1021).

[3] Cf. E. G. Holland: "Who was the first Faust?" *Appleton's Journal*, XIV (1875), 80-81.

count of the temptation of Jesus in the wilderness is based upon a belief in the possibility of an agreement of reciprocal obligations or relations between man and the Devil and upon the recognition of the Devil's great power in this world.[4] This idea is particularly noted in the words which Satan addresses to Jesus in showing him all the kingdoms of the world: "All these things will I give thee, if thou wilt fall down and worship me" (Matt. iv. 9; cf. Luke iv. 6-7).

The term "New Testament," which meant to the early Christians and still means, in the original Greek, the "New Contract" or the "New Covenant," furnished he theologians with additional scriptural support for the belief in the possibility of man entering into a formal contract or covenant with the Devil, who was represented by the Church fathers as the replica of the Deity. The Adversary, wishing in every respect to counterfeit the acts of the Almighty, naturally also attempts to form a compact with men.

St. Jerome accepted this belief in a devil-compact to explain the expressions "a covenant with death" and "an agreement with hell" used by the prophet Isaiah in reproaching the rulers of Jerusalem for their unconcern about the impending peril for their city. The passage runs as follows:

"Wherefore hear the word of the Lord, ye scornful men, that rule this people which is in Jerusalem. Because ye have said, We have made a covenant with death, and with hell are we at agreement; when the overflowing scourge shall pass through, it shall not come unto us: for we have made lies our refuge, and under falsehood have we hid ourselves. Therefore saith the Lord God, Behold . . . the hail shall sweep away the refuge of lies, and the waters shall overflow the hiding place. And your covenant with death shall be disannulled, and your agreement with hell shall not stand; when the overflowing scourge shall pass through, then ye shall be trodden down by it" (Is. xxviii. 14-18).

The belief in a devil-compact was supported by many other prominent Church fathers. St. Augustine treats the notion at great length. St. Basil the Great, bishop of Cæsaria (370-379), tells in his *Dialogues* of a compact which his own servant Proterius closed with the Fiend. According to the account of this legend given in the *Alphabet of Tales*, written in fifteenth-century English, this young man sold himself to the Devil for the love of a woman.

Naturally enough, the diabolical pacts of the first centuries of our era must be taken not in the apocalyptic but in the Hellenic

[4] Cf. [Gustav] Georg Roskoff: *Geschichte des Teufels* (Leipzig, 1869), I, 201, note 9.

sense. It was purely a question of conversion to the old pagan divinities, whom the Christians had reduced to devils. Even the famous devil-compact of St. Theophilus, of the sixth century, must have differed considerably from the medieval diabolical pacts by which Diabolus won everything and his human partner nothing but the prospect of the rack or the stake.

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The idea of the devil-compact penetrated from Asia into Europe through the intermediary of Byzantium, and was merged with beliefs that were similar and perhaps originally related. The old Northern demon, according to Jacob Grimm, also formed a pact with men, although he did not exact a written agreement.[5] In fact, the agreement in writing can only have originated in a period during which Roman legal forms had arrived to the peoples of the West.

It is not always possible for us to detect in folk-lore what is indigenous and what belongs to foreign nationalities. The identity of the beliefs and practices of primitive peoples the world over can be explained in two ways: If we assume that they were of independent origin, we must explain their identity by the uniformity of the human mind; but if, on the other hand, we hold to the belief of their common origin and beginnings from a common geographic center, it follows that their dissemination throughout the world must have come about through migration or mixture of races.[6]

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The idea of the devil-compact among the Northern peoples included various elements. First of all, it was derived from the manner in which men negotiated in heathen times with the hearth-spirits of the most varied character. The Nords in ancient days dealt with sprites just as the farmers now treat their hired help. Terms of service were arranged by our ancestors with Cobolds as with human beings. They were hired and "fired" as the need presented itself or ceased to exist. When the demons of hell assumed the heritage of the ancient household-spirits among the Northern

[5] Cf. Jacob Grimm: *Deutsche Mythologie*. 4. Aufl. Berlin 1875-78. Translated from the German (*Teutonic Mythology*) by J. S. Stallybrass. 4 vols. London, 1882-88.

[6] M. Gaster in his paper, "Folk-Lore in the Old Testament," *Folk-Lore*, XXX (1919), 75, believes that the latter view is now being more and more recognized.

peoples, they also negotiated with men agreements of mutual service and promise. They, too, served their masters for stipulated periods in return for certain rewards, chief among which were human souls. The services exacted from the demons of hell by our ancestors increased, however, in proportion to the increase of their power. When the Devil was given unlimited sway over the world, the demands placed upon him and his underlings knew no limitations.

The conception of the devil-compact can also be explained as a survival of the old blood-bond with the titular deity.[7] It was believed in ancient days that a bond by blood-transfusion could be formed with spiritual as well as with human beings. This will account for the part which the red vital fluid plays in the diabolical pact. The writing or signing by man of the required document with blood drawn from his own veins as earnest-money of future full payment—his soul—is an addition which grew out of a misconception of the original meaning of this covenant with the trusted divinity. The use of blood in the devil-compact to bind man's promise to the powers of hell may also be explained by the idea found in the Old Testament that strength and feeling dwelt in the blood, which was considered the seat of all life.[8] In fact, blood already played a part in the evocations of the evil spirits practised by the Jews of the post-exilic period.

The idea of the blood-signed devil-compact may also have derived a few points from the Odin cult, in which men signed acts of self-dedication to the deity by marking their arms with the spear-point. This custom was traditionally derived from the conduct of the god himself, who is said to have marked himself with a javelin point, as he neared his end while he was envisaged as a king ruling over Sweden.

The selling of a man's soul to Satan is, furthermore, of cannibalistic inception. It is vestigially of the old sacrificial cult. The divinity with whom man covenanted was supposed to absorb the soul of his human ally when he devoured his body. The psychical was a part of the physical nutrition. Man's soul was transferred to the divinity together with his flesh. This will account for the medieval belief that the demons devoured the souls of the damned

[7] Concerning the idea of the old blood-bond, see H. C. Trumbull: *The Blood Covenant*, Philadelphia, 1893.

[8] Cf. Georg Roskoff, *op. cit.*, I, 347.

in hell. This idea probably is of Oriental origin. The seven Assyrian evil spirits had a predilection for human flesh and blood. Ghouls and vampires belong to this class of demons. Edgar Allan Poe, in his story "Bon-Bon" (1835), represents the demons as preparing in hell all sorts of fancy dishes made of human souls. When the original idea of cannibalism disappeared, the pledging of the human soul to the spirit was understood to mean the extension of his kingdom. It was reserved for Christianity to interpret the dedication by man of his soul to his titular divinity as the loss of his salvation.[9]

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Although the Christian belief in devil-compacts goes back, as has been shown, to the fourth century, it was not prevalent until the Middle Ages when it took a great hold on the minds of men. For three hundred years the idea was universal throughout the civilized world. Pope Innocent VIII, in his famous bull, "Summis desiderantes," issued on December 5, 1484, officially recognized the possibility for man to form of his own free will a pact with the powers of hell. The Reformation, which was a movement of progress in so many respects, still increased the popular belief that man could covenant with the demons of hell. In fact, the century of the Reformation even brought the belief in demonology and witchcraft to its height. According to Jean Bodin, author of *la Démonomanie des sorciers* (1580), a Paris lawyer was hanged in 1571 for having signed a bond with the Devil. In Germany, an edict of the Elector Augustus of Saxony of the year 1572 proclaimed the penalty of death by fire against whomsoever "in forgetfulness of his Christian faith shall have entered into a compact, or hold converse or intercourse, with the Devil. . . ." In England, as late as 1643, a certain Thomas Browne was indicted before a Middlesex jury for selling his soul to an evil spirit for an annuity of £1000 but was acquitted. This belief was also carried over to the New World. Increase Mather, the New England preacher, likewise affirmed that many men made "cursed covenants with the Prince of Darkness."

[9] Cf. Julius Lippert: *Christentum, Volksglaube und Volksbrauch* (Berlin, 1882), p. 563.

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The belief as it prevailed among our medieval ancestors was to the effect that man could enter with the Devil into a compact by which he obtained from hell whatever he desired for a certain period —later fixed at twenty-four years—at the expiration of which term he was to deliver his soul to the Devil. It was supposed that Diabolus, wishing to draw man away from the Deity, assured for himself by this means man's soul while its owner was still living—*vivente corpore,* as it is related in Edgar Allan Poe's story "Bon-Bon" already mentioned. In his anxiety to obtain human souls, the Fiend felt no hesitancy in paying even hard cash for them, as it is expressed by Victor Hugo in his novel *Han d'Islande* (1822). The deed of transfer had to be written or at least signed by man with blood drawn from his own veins.

The man who wished to enter into business relations with the Devil generally applied to a Jew to act as intermediary. It was believed that only Jews could enter into communication with the Devil through the arts of magic. In the Theophilus-legend, the Jew who acts as a go-between is a sort of sorcerer who is disloyal to his own religion. When Chateaubriand, in his novel *les Martyrs* (1809), employs a Jew as an agent of hell, he also represents him as a Jew who has renounced the faith of his fathers. The zealot in one religion prefers a zealot to a liberal even in an opposing religion. In later legends, the sorcerer or sorceress, who brings about the meeting between man and the emissary of hell, is not always descended from the seed of Abraham.

In many literary works wherein is employed the tradition of a man selling his soul to Satan, the shadow, regarded as an emanation, an extension, so to say a "part," of the personality, is symbolically used for the soul. In Chamisso's *Peter Schlemihl* (1814), the title-character sells his shadow to the Devil for the purse of Fortunatus, and then, putting on the seven-leagued boots, diverts his mind from unpleasant thoughts by running about the world. Edgar Allan Poe offers an example of the identification of the shadow with the soul in "Bon-Bon." Oscar Wilde, in his tale "The Fisherman and his Soul" (1891), likewise considers the shadow of the body as the body of the soul.

Man could even sell to Satan a part of his body. Alphonse Karr, in "la Main du diable" (1855), narrates the suffering of a man who

offered his right hand to the Devil in exchange for his brother's life. His brother recovered from his illness, and to fulfill his part of the agreement, he cut his right hand off and paid with his own life for the remission of his brother's.

It is further known that man could surrender to Satan not only his own soul, but also that of a person over whom he had authority. The medieval legend of the knight who sold his wife to the Devil is well known.[10]

Satan entered into the possession of man's soul when the term ran out by killing man's body. Man thus paid the penalty for his bargain with Beelzebub with violent death. The Devil usually inflicted death upon his victim by tearing his flesh with his sharp claws and teeth. It must be observed, however, that the Devil has no interest whatever in man's body. If he kills the man, it is only to obtain his soul. "When the term [of the devil-pact] is over," Victor Hugo tells us in his novel *Notre-Dame de Paris* (1831), "the Devil destroys the body in taking the soul, just as a monkey cracks the shell to eat the nut."

The Devil, notwithstanding the great power he possesses over the bodies and minds of mortals, is, however, not potent enough to put a man to death, unless his victim has blasphemed or renounced the Lord.[11] This idea probably sprang out of the limitation imposed by the Almighty upon the power of Satan during the temptation of Job and out of the advice given the great sufferer by his well-meaning wife: "Curse God, and die" (Job ii. 9). It is only in such cases that the Devil has over men "the power of death" (Hebr. ii. 14; 1 Cor. v. 5). In view of this limitation of his power over the body of man, Diabolus exacted from his partner in the bond, which assigned the victim's soul to hell, a formal denial of the Christian faith, a rejection of Christian symbols and a renunciation of the Lord and his saints. The Devil was particularly anxious about his

[10] This medieval legend of the knight and his wife has been retold by W. Carew Hazlitt in his collection *Tales and Legends of National Origin* (London: Macmillan, 1899).

[11] In Bürgers ballad "Lenore" (1774), a young girl curses God for having robbed her of her lover William, who had fought at the side of King Frederick at the battle of Prague and died on that occasion. She is then carried off by the Devil, who appears on horseback at midnight beneath Lenore's window in the form of her lover and calls her to ride with him to their wedding-bed. Another illustration of the Devil's power over a man, who has cursed God, is furnished in Victor Hugo's ballad "les Deux archers" (1825), in which two archers, who blasphemed God, are immediately killed and carried off to hell by the Devil.

partner's repudiation of his baptism, the first sacrament which wipes away the original stain, which sacrament is man's safeguard against Satan. The man not only was expected to deny his baptism, but he had to accept another sacrament of baptism from hell. He also was forced to express a hatred for all Christians and a promise to resist all attempts to convert him.

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The contract-stories differ as to the objects which the human party to the agreement designed to derive from it. Position, power, protection, and pleasure were for the most part the objects for which man sold his soul to Satan. Wealth and learning, which figured so frequently in the contracts formed by man with the Fiend, were intended to provide man with the power for which he craved. Man aimed often to obtain, through contact or contract with the spirits of hell, such powers as would put him in a position to accomplish things beyond the ordinary conditions of humanity. He wished to batter down the walls of natural limitations imposed upon all mortals, and thus gain mastery of the world.

As prince of this world, the Devil could without any difficulty grant even the most extravagant wishes of man. He often even promised to place his magic powers at the service of the contracting party. "It was usually by means of contracts with the Devil," says Professor Ward, "that in a number of medieval legends men were said to have obtained a full command over the objects of those passions which it was the task of the Christian religion to repress or repel. Thus they were thought to have been enabled to drink to the dregs the cup of sensual indulgence, to satisfy the cravings of earthly ambition, to glut the accursed hunger for gold and for all that gold can buy, and to gratify the desire for knowledge of all things good and evil and for the power which knowledge insures."[12]

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Generally a pact with the Devil cost man his eternal salvation. But Diabolus often found a man who was clever enough to outwit

[12] Cf. A. W. Ward: *Old English Drama* (4th ed., Oxford, 1901), pp. xiii-xiv.

the purchaser of his soul.[13] Although Satan is called the archdeceiver, he can easily be deceived and hoodwinked. Popular belief, in fact, often represents the Devil as a trusting fool who is outwitted by the shallowest forms of trickery and dishonesty. Man has no scruples about his breach of contract with Beelzebub. He feels no hesitancy whatever in avoiding his part of the obligations mutually incurred by the two contracting parties. In violation of the written pact, he often cheats the Devil out of his legal due by technical squibbles. Man considers the legal document signed with his own blood as "a scrap of paper." "But still the pact is with the Enemy," says Henry Osborne Taylor; "the man is not bound beyond the letter, and may escape by any trick. It still is the ethics of war; we are very close to the principle that a man by strategem or narrow observance of the letter may escape the eternal retribution which God decrees conditionally and the Devil delights in."[14]

The Devil, on the other hand, is never known to have tried evading the fulfilment of his share of the agreement. Although he is said to be a liar, Satan has never attempted to cheat his stipulators.[15] In regard to the fulfilment of his word, the father of lies has always set an example in honesty to his Christian negotiators.[16] There is a universal belief that the Fiend invariably fulfils his part of the obligations. It is a fact well worth noting that, although the Devil insists that his human negotiator sign the deed with his blood, he himself never has been required to sign it even in ink. The human party to the transaction has always had full confidence in the Devil's word. "It is peculiar to the German tradition," says Gustav Freytag, "that the Devil, in the compacts which he makes with men, endeavors to fulfill zealously and honestly the terms of agreement to the letter; the defaulter is man."[17] But the Germans have no

[13] The Gascon, who always has had a reputation for shrewdness in France, may, in the opinion of Anatole France, safely make a pact with the Devil, "for you may be sure that it is the Devil who will be duped" (*la Rôtisserie de la*

[14] Henry Osborne Taylor: *The Mediæval Mind* (2 vols., London, 1911), I, 489.

[15] The German writer, Grabbe, in *Don Juan und Faust* (1822), runs counter to popular tradition when he says, "Wer mit dem Teufel dingt, der wird betrogen" (He who negociates with the Devil is cheated).

[16] Bret Harte, in his poem "A Legend of Cologne," assures us that it has never been heard that the "Father of Lies" ever broke his word, and that the Devil has left "this position in every tradition to be taken by the 'truth-loving' Christian."
Reine Pédauque, 1893).

[17] Cf. Gustav Freytag: *The Devil in Germany During the Sixteenth Century*. Transl. from the German by Wm. A. Hervey (New Hork, 1893), p. 12.

monopoly to this belief. Already in the *Golden Legend*,[18] we find it reported that Satan once bitterly complained of the manner in which men try to evade their obligations towards him, whereas he always faithfully fulfils his part of the pact. "The Christians," he complained, "are cheats; they make all sorts of promises so long as they want me, and then leave me in the lurch, and reconcile themselves with Christ as soon as, by my help, they have got what they want."

We can now understand why in Eugene Field's story, "Daniel and the Devil" (1893), it seems so strange to Satan that he should be asked for a written guarantee that he would fulfil his part of the contract. Evidently this was the first time that the Devil had any transaction with an American businessman, who has not even faith in Old Nick.

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The medieval Church itself provided man with the means of evading the terms of his contract with the Devil. The bold contractor knew full well that he could count upon the Church to save him from the jaws of hell and force the Devil to surrender his rights to man's soul. In fact, prior to the Reformation, the Devil was nearly always cheated of his bargain through the instrumentalities of the Church.

The surest way for medieval man to avoid paying the penalty of his rash action in compacting with the powers of hell was to appeal to the Holy Virgin, who was always ready to fight the Fiend. The votary of the Virgin could especially count upon the Mother of all Mercies to help him break the contract with the Enemy if he omitted her in his general renunciation of the saints of Heaven.

The Virgin had in the Middle Ages almost as much power as the Trinity. As has well been remarked by Karl Pearson, she was the vindication of the right of the common folk to a goddess of their own kind.[19] In the medieval drama, Christ gives his mother, upon her assumption to heaven, a crown and scepter with full power over the Devil.[20] It is the Queen of Heaven rather than her Son

[18] The *Golden Legend* (*Legenda aurea sive historia Lombardica*), a collection of stories of the saints taken partly from books partly from verbal accounts, was compiled about 1275 by Jacobus de Voragine, a Dominican archbishop of Genoa. Longfellow has chosen this title for the second part of his *Christus: A Mystery* (1873).

[19] Cf. Karl Pearson: *The Chances of Death and Other Studies in Evolution* (London, 1897), II, 351.

[20] In Ostendorfer's woodcut, the Virgin carries the keys of heaven and hell.

who breaks the bolts and bonds of hell and binds the Enemy with all his crew. The Blessed Virgin was a sort of valkyr or amazon, always at war with the demons to snatch the pacts and the souls of the repentant sinners from them. The medieval poets call her for this reason Noah's Ark which carries mankind over the hell-flood.[21] The stories of the pitying interposition of the Mother of Christ on behalf of the repentant sinners are, according to Henry Osborne Taylor, among "the fragrant flowers of the mediæval spirit."[22] The Polish writer, Ignace Matuszewski, explains the rôle which is assigned to the Virgin in Catholic legend as a psychological atavism, a heritage of the mystic faith of the primitive peoples in the influence of the woman over the demon.[23] In pagan times the woman already possessed power over the evil spirits. In Hindu mythology, Kali or Durga interceded in the fight between her husband Siva and the demon Darida. The mother of all men was told by the Lord that she could crush the serpent's head. The predominance of drollery, however, soon altered this poetic conception of woman. It is then the old toothless hag, spindle in hand, the very sight of whom puts the Devil in flight. The woman appears in this rôle in the medieval *fabliaux* and farces.[24]

The Blessed Virgin snatched from the jaws of hell Merlin,[25] Theophilus,[26] and Robert the Devil.[27] In the medieval story of the

[21] In a Spanish play *Mascaron* of the thirteenth century, the Holy Virgin appears in defence of the human race against the charges brought by the demon Mascaron.

[22] Cf. Henry Osborne Taylor, *op. cit.*, I, 490.

[23] Cf. Ignace Matuszewski: *Dyabel w poczyi* (2nd ed., Warsaw, 1899), p. 105.

[24] Read in this connection the ballad "The Devil and the Scold" in the collection *English and Scottish Ballads* (Boston: Houghton, 1858), VIII, 257-8.

[25] Merlin, a legendary diviner, plays a very important part in the Celtic legends and the medieval tales of chivalry as the friend of King Arthur, who was, according to Cæsarius of Heisterbach, the son of a demon and a nun. Through the intervention of the Virgin, he did not follow in his father's footsteps and was finally saved from perdition.

[26] The Theophilus-legend will be treated in the next paper.

[27] Robert the Devil, the son of a duke and duchess of Normandy, was counted among the great progeny of Satan. He was born, according to the confession of his own mother, in answer to prayers addressed to the Devil. According to another version of this legend, the Devil was Robert's physical father. However, when Robert learned of his diabolical descent, he turned from his father to God. After he had repented of his misdeeds, the Blessed Virgin took pity on him, secured his pardon and had him married to the daughter of the emperor of Sicily, with whom he was in love. During his courageous defense of Rome against the besieging Saracens, an angel bestowed upon this penitent celestial weapons with which he was given power to rout his enemies. The medieval legend of Robert the Devil has been retold by W. Carew Hazlitt in the book already mentioned.

knight who sold his spouse to Satan, the Mother of God, to whom the victim addressed herself on her way to the Devil, assumed her form and accompanied the knight in her stead to the Devil and forced him to return the deed to the knight. Many later works also represent the woman as victor over the demons of hell. Cyprian in Calderón's play, *El Mágico prodigioso* (1663), is saved through the instrumentality of a woman, whose spirit of innocence defies and defeats the Devil's power. Goethe, in *Faust* (1808-32), has woman, not a particular woman, but the Eternal Womanly—*das Ewig Weibliche*—draw Faust onward and upward in the end and redeem him from hell.[28]

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The Devil, notwithstanding all the disappointments these commercial transactions have brought him, evidently has up to this day not renounced this poorly paying business of purchasing human souls. The shrewd dealer should realize that he possesses the human soul without any contract or any special document and without paying a penny for it. In fact, a man can surrender his soul to Satan under no necessity of signing a document. Thus Don Joan lost himself to the Devil through his bad deeds, without entering into any special contract. When a man commits a sin, he falls into the power of the Enemy. Each evil deed is an act of acquiescence to Satan's will, which is equivalent to an alliance with him. "Give up your soul to Satan's darling sins," it has been said by a clergyman, "and he will help you for a season until he has his claims carefully wound around you. When his links are carefully closed, he seizes his victim, who has no longer any power to resist." Carlyle has also said: "Follow the Devil faithfully, you are sure enough to go to the Devil; whither else can you go?"

[28] A very interesting modern version of this idea of woman's victory over the Devil will be found in Frederick Beecher Perkins's story, *Devil-Puzzlers* (1871), which has been reprinted in the present writer's anthology of *Devil Stories* (New York: Knopf, 1921).