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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK G-R-R-R...! ***

Roger Arcot explores the fringes of a really never forgotten world, the introduction to which is an aged manuscript De Necromantiae, and the wish, not too repressed, to pledge your soul to the Devil! There are many strange memories and unhappy frustrated souls in this Fantastic Universe of ours—strange and sinister memories and stranger urges, frightening urges that refuse to die in the heart of Brother Ambrose.

g-r-r-r...!

by ... ROGER ARCOT

He had borne the thousand and one injuries with humility and charity. But the insults! These were more than he could suffer....

GR-R-R! There he goes again! Brother Ambrose could scarce restrain the hatred that seethed and churned in his breast, as his smallish eyes followed Brother Lorenzo headed once more for his beloved geraniums, the inevitable watering-pot gripped in both hands, the inevitable devotions rising in a whispered stream from his saintly lips. The very fact the man lived was a mockery to human justice: God's blood, but if thoughts could only kill.

Ave, Virgo!

The thousand and one injuries of Fray Lorenzo he had borne as a Christian monk should, with humility and charity. But the insults, aye, the insults to faith and reason! They were more than a generous Father could expect His most adoring servant to suffer, weren't they? To have to sit next to the man, for instance, at evening meal and hear his silly prattle of the weather. Next year's crop of cork: we can scarcely expect oak-galls, he says. Isn't *petroselinum* the name for parsley? (No, it's Greek, you swine. And what's the Greek name for Swine's Snout? I could hurl it at you, like the Pope hurling anathema.) *Salve tibi!* It sticks in one's craw to bless him with the rest. Would God our cloister numbered thirty-and-nine instead of forty.

For days now, for weeks, Brother Ambrose had witnessed and endured the false piety of the man. How he'd ever got admitted to the order in the first place beat all supposition. It must have been his sanctimonious apple-cheeks or (Heaven forbid such simony), some rich relative greased the palm of the Prior. *Saint, forsooth!*

Brother Ambrose recalled just a week previous; they had been outside the walls, a round dozen of the brothers, gathering the first few bushels of grapes to make the good Benedictine wine. And all men tended to their duty in the vineyard—save who? Save lecherous Lorenzo, whose job was to attend the press. Picked the assignment himself, most likely, so he could ogle the brown thighs and browner ankles of Dolores squatting on the Convent bank, *gitana* slut with her flashing eyes and hint of sweet delight in those cherry-red lips and coquettish tossing shoulders. A man could see she was child of the devil, flesh to tempt to eternal hellfire.

But how skillful Brother Lorenzo had been in keeping the glow in his dead eye from being seen by the others! Only Ambrose had known it was there. Invisible to even the world, perhaps; but lurking just the same in Lorenzo's feverishly disguised brain. *Si*, there and lusting beyond a doubt. By one's faith, the blue-black hair of Dolores would make any weak man itch; and the stories that had floated on the breeze that day, livelily exchanged between her and that roguish Sanchicha, the *lavandera*; Lorenzo must surely have lapped them all up like a hungry spaniel, though he cleverly turned his head away so you would not guess. After all, Ambrose, scarcely a

step closer, could recall clearly every word of the bawdy tales!

Back to the table again; and Brother Ambrose once more noticed how Fray Lorenzo never let his fork and knife lie crosswise, an obvious tribute he, himself, always made in Our Senor's praise. Nor did Lorenzo honor the Trinity by drinking his orange-pulp in three quiet sips; rather (the Arian heretic) he drained it at a gulp. Now, he was out trimming his myrtle-bush. And touching up his roses.

Gr-r-r, again! Watching his enemy putter away in the deepening twilight that followed the decline of the Andalusian sun, Brother Ambrose recalled the other traps he had lain to trip the hypocrite. Traps set and failed; but, oh, so delicious anyhow, these attempts to send him flying off to Hell where he belonged: a Cathar or a Manichee. That last one, involving the pornographic French novel so scrofulous and wicked. How could it failed to have snared its prey? Especially, when Fray Ambrose had spent such sleepless nights, working out his plot in great detail?

Brother Ambrose allowed himself an inward chortle, as he paced along the portico, recollecting how close to success the scheme had come. The book had had to be read first (or re-read, rather) by Ambrose to determine just which chapter would be most apt to damn a soul with concupiscent suggestion. Gray paper with blunt type, the whole book had been easy enough to grasp for that matter—what with the words so badly spelled out. The cuckoldry tales of Boccaccio and that gay old archpriest, Juan Ruiz de Hita, what dry reading they seemed by comparison—almost like decretals.

As if by misadventure, Brother Ambrose had left the book in Lorenzo's cell, the pages doubled down at the woeful sixteenth print. Ah, there had been a passage! Simply glancing at it, you groveled hand and foot in Belial's grip.

But, that twice-cursed Lorenzo must have had the devil's luck that day. A breeze sprang up to flip the volume closed; and the monk, not knowing the book's owner and espying only its name, had handed it over to the Prior who had promptly turned the monastery upside down in search of further such adulterous contraband!

Worse fortune followed. The next day, Brother Lorenzo had come down with a temporary stroke of blindness—it lasted only a week; but even so, for seven days Ambrose had been forced to labor in his stead in the drafty library, copying boresome scrolls in a light scarcely less dim than moonlight. Worse still, the Prior had found mistakes: letters dropped, transposed (Latin was so bothersomely regular; compared to the vulgar tongue). For what he called such "inexcusable slovenliness," the Prior had imposed a penance of bread and water and extra toil.

Slovenliness! Why didn't the Prior—was he blind, too?—notice the deadly sins that were each day so neatly practised by Brother Lorenzo? They went unpunished. Probably, God's Angel would even be found to have been asleep when Judgment Day came around and Lorenzo would slip into Heaven by a wink, as one might say.

Obviously, there was no justice, except such as man would make himself, Brother Ambrose had at last decided.

Ave Maria, plena gratia.

Now at last, he was alone in his cell, free finally from the unendurable (sometimes it seemed everlasting) torment of Brother Lorenzo's presence. Twenty-nine distinct damnations listed in Galatians, if you cared to look up the text; and not one of them could the enemy be made to trip on, a-dying.

In fact, of late, so bad had the situation grown that Brother Ambrose had even once considered pledging his soul to Satan. Oh, not for keeps! No enmity was worth that dread sacrifice. But as a trick, sort of—with a flaw in the indenture that proud Lucifer would miss until it was too late to wriggle out of the bargain.

But that had been two days ago.

Now, a better scheme presented itself to Brother Ambrose, engendered by that forced labor within the dreary precincts of the convent library. For that was where (and when) he had made his delightful discovery, the one that would now redeem him from all his irritations and travail. The discovery that would rid him of Brother Lorenzo for always!

It had happened like this.

Inasmuch as the monastery was over eight hundred years old, many ancient books and moldy scrolls lay forgotten in the cobwebby corners of the great library, especially where the light was gloomy. One afternoon during his week of enforced toil, Brother Ambrose had sought the shelter of one of these ill-lighted and seldom-visited nooks of the building to recover certain lost hours of sleep, hours that had gone astray the night before as he sat up in his lonely cell and brooded over his wrongs. But before his drowsy head could nod off into dreams completely, his eye had chanced to notice a faded scroll that jutted forth from its fellows on the shelves. Starting to push the offender back in place, Ambrose's fingers had hesitated when he noticed the title: *De Necromantiae*.

Surely, thought the monk, such a book belonged on the Index. Then, it occurred to him that possibly the copy in front of him was the only one of its kind in the world, in which case not even

the Holy Father could be expected to know it existed. Then, how could it be on the Index or be forbidden?

Taking advantage of this personal achievement in casuistry, Brother Ambrose promptly untied the scroll and began reading.

What he discovered there interested him very much. We do not intend to describe all of the marvels unfolded for him in that venerable mildewed manuscript, for some of the more gruesome mysteries of the supernatural world are better left unrevealed; but let it be said at least, that one chapter intrigued Brother Ambrose immensely. So much so, that he shamelessly whipped out his scissors and, nipping that section, stuck it inside his rough wool robes so he might peruse it at greater leisure within the privacy of his cell.

The chapter that evoked such delight and interest within Brother Ambrose's complicated brain was one that had been penned in the early ages of the Church by a lay-brother who had concerned himself with pagan magic. In it, he had described the fiendish habits and activities of werewolves and had actually even presented a formula. *Ut Fiat Homo Lupinus* it was entitled, which purported to give the secret words and ritual necessary to achieve the transformation from man to beast.

At last, the opportunity had arrived Ambrose's way to achieve his long-desired revenge on Brother Lorenzo!

Twenty-four hours had passed since the momentous discovery. The moment was at hand. Night again had settled upon the Spanish cloisters, the last bell had tolled; and all the good and hardy men were supposed to be at sound sleep on their rough iron cots. But in Brother Ambrose's chilly cell, a small candle burned—casting sickly light that produced huge flickering shadows against the whitewashed walls.

Brother Ambrose held the treasured piece of manuscript between his hands. It was difficult to make out the faded Latin; the writing was cramped and crude, and Ambrose was no scholar to boot. But like all persons of his times, he was quite well-aware of the existence of werewolves, werefoxes, and other such monsters; and he held no doubt but what the spell would work.

It was the scheming brother's plan to creep in the stealth of night down the corridor to the barred oak door of Lorenzo's own simple cell. There, he would knock; lightly enough to disturb no other sleepers, yet loud enough that the rapping would summon Brother Lorenzo from whatever wicked dreams might be festering in his own sleeping mind.

As Fray Lorenzo's naked footsteps were heard pattering across the bare floor, Ambrose would drink the bat's blood he had collected, sniff the wolfbane he had ground to ash, and pronounce the obscure Celtic words that would alter the very atoms of his flesh, transforming them into an obscene travesty of life. Brother Lorenzo, when he opened the door, would be met not by a fellow human being, but by a snarling fanged wolf that would hurl its hairy bulk at the drowsy monk's own throat.

The next day, the entire monastery would be awakened, of course, by shouts of the news that foul murder had been discovered. But no amount of detection would ever manifest the bestial murderer. Brother Ambrose would hug to his soul the secret of his crime until the day of his shriving.

At length, the hour had grown so late that it was certain even the Prior himself must have long since retired.

Brother Ambrose made ready to carry out his deed. He rose from his cot, removed the coarse brown robe that normally he wore to bed as well as in his daily rounds so that his long-unwashed body stood naked. There must be no chance for tell-tale blood to stain his clothes, when his fierce talons and wolfish teeth tore and rended at human flesh.

Carrying his precious piece of scroll, he departed from his cell and groped his way down the stone corridor until the light improved enough for him to see his way. Luckily, a patch of moonlight illuminated the very space in front of the accursed Brother Lorenzo's door. What fortune!

Brother Ambrose halted and stared at the door as though his eyes could see through it, at the sleeping form within. He sucked in a deep breath. His palms were sweaty; his heartbeat rapid. For a moment, he was almost ready to back out.

Then suddenly, the memory of all the hundreds of grudges he bore against Lorenzo surged through him. Hatred built up a massive reservoir, that broke out over his crumbling conscience and flooded his body with anger and wild resentment. His teeth gritted. What had he been thinking of—to retreat now, with revenge so nearly at hand!

He rapped. A moment later, he heard a creaking sound like Brother Lorenzo slipping out of bed.

Trembling, he lifted the phial of bat's blood, drank it down. It tasted salty. He chewed on the wolfbane powder until it mixed with the saliva of his mouth, then he swallowed. Holding the ancient scroll-segment before him, he began to repeat the badly-written incantation: *Ut fiat homo lupinus, pulvis arnicae facenda est et dum...*

A thousand jolts assailed his body, as if he had been struck by all the lightnings in heaven. Then,

came a rushing paralysis, a distortion of time and space, a dread feeling of disintegration and death ...

The door to Brother Lorenzo's cell began to recede, swelling in volume as it did. The ceiling of the corridor likewise retreated at ever-increasing pace. Staring down at his own dwindling frame, Ambrose saw that the slug-white flesh was now covered with thick fur, even as the limbs were gnarling—

Then, suddenly the door opened. Brother Lorenzo stepped out, his kindly pious face wrinkled with sleep but otherwise showing no irritation or displeasure at being summoned from his rest. At first, the monk seemed not to have noticed Ambrose's form, for he gazed above him and away.

Ambrose kept on shrinking.

Finally, Brother Lorenzo's gaze chanced to glance downward. But still, his features mirrored no recognition or alarm; only puzzlement.

Now, thought Ambrose, now is the time for me to snarl.

But no snarl, nor semblance of a snarl, emerged from his lips. Rather, his lips had elongated into long sucking proboscises, while already a third pair of limbs had commenced growing from his furred-over abdomen.

This was not a wolf-like form, he was assuming, Ambrose suddenly realized in terror. But if it was not lupine, what was it? Had he misread the incantation? Had he mispronounced a simple word?

The weird crawling form into which he had metamorphosed was now hardly an inch higher than the surface of the floor. But Ambrose's eyes had bulged into great many-faceted orbs capable of seeing objects with greater clarity than ever. Inches away from him, he made out the segment of scroll he had discarded after reading aloud from it. Crawling over to it, he perused the beginning words of the spell.

And it suddenly dawned on him (while what passed for a heart and ventricles within his pulpy form began simulating horror) that the ancient monk of centuries ago who had first copied the incantation must have been as careless of spelling as he. For the charm obviously did not convert its user into a werewolf, but rather some other animal ...

Dredging up all the miserable Latin he knew, Ambrose fished for some word similar to *lupinus*.

And suddenly he had it!

Pulicus! That was the word the sloppy copyist of yesteryear had wrongly transcribed.

From the word *pulex*, meaning "flea."

Not how to become a wolf-like man, but a flea-like man—that was what the formula had described.

Ambrose, the flea, braced himself. Gathering his powerful legs under him, he leaped in soaring flight to land upon the object of hatred—the giant Brother Lorenzo, who towered so high above him.

But the gentle and considerate Brother Lorenzo, who probably would not have hurt hair nor hide of any other creature on Earth—even he knew full well that there is only one thing you can do to discourage a flea.

Swat!

<p>Transcriber's Note: This etext was produced from <i>Fantastic Universe</i> January 1957. Extensive research did not uncover any evidence that the U.S. copyright on this publication was renewed. Minor spelling and typographical errors have been corrected without note.</p>

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