

FACTS ABOUT FAUST

by BRANCH CABELL

So fallen is your estate, Sir, that your main function nowadays is to keep people away from the opera. "It is only 'Faust' to-night," they say. "Let's not go." And the person addressed will, as a rule, assent cheerfully enough, because—as a tenor rôle—you have become an unvalued antique, to the majority of us, a long while ago.

Tenors have not much in common with antiques, I admit, except that their legs are so rarely of the best period. And besides that, one does customarily feel, after the first act of "Faust," that while Mephistopheles was about the task of rejuvenating you, he might better have made a complete job of it, by restricting your waistline and abdomen, which retain still the majestic contours of sedate middle life. In fact, Sir, inasmuch as Gounod has so arranged matters that in your love-affair you have no rival except a contralto most unconvincingly dressed as a boy, one admits that Marguerite is not blessed with the happiest possible choice of seducers. . . . Yet does the facility with which she allows your entrance into her bedroom, within twenty-five minutes of your first meeting, rather strikingly justify her brother Valentine's last admonition at parting, to let men alone during his absence. He doubtless knew a bit more about Marguerite's past than we do. For one, I have not ever, quite, felt that she deserved the luxury of that uncommonly large and airy prison cell in the last act, in addition to a jailer so unsuspecting by nature as to accept her singing trios in the middle of the night as an affair of course. Most jailers would think this a phenomenon calling for prompt investigation.

All which musical criticism has led me some distance from my point, that to most of us, Dr. Faustus, you have become merely the tenor rôle in an opera of which we have grown more or less tired.

It seems an odd avatar for you who, living, termed yourself the demi-god of Heidelberg, *Philosophus Philosophorum*, the fountain of necromancers, astrologer, chiromancer, aëromancer, and pyromancer, along with yet other magniloquent titles; and by your contemporaries were described as a vagabond, an empty babbler, a mere fool, an infamous beast, a sodomite, and a cesspool of countless devils. But the truth about you, as about all of us, lies somewhere between a man's private notion of himself and the publicly expressed opinions of his neighbors as to the same topic.

We know that you were born, during the latter years of the fifteenth century, at Kundling (which is now Knittlingen) in Würtemberg; that you studied magic at Cracow in Poland; and that you by-and-by came to the newly opened University of Wittenberg, to take up, by a rather startling change, the study of divinity. You were not destined, however, to adorn the church. Instead (to every appearance, in the year of grace 1515) you made your well-known and supremely unclerical compact with Mephistopheles, whereby your soul was transferred to this fiend in exchange for twenty-four years of his services. Yet were you not incited to your bargain, it so happened, by the sight of a soprano in a blond wig, viewed through a strip of gauze. You were inflamed otherwise, by the scholar's more rarefied lust to acquire knowledge and still more knowledge. You desired to fathom, in one stunted human lifetime, all the secrets of heaven and earth, and of hell also.

You wanted knowledge. You desired, as do most of us, a sufficiency of fine food and sound wine and fair women; and your taste in humor was both crude and unbridled. But, for the most part, you made of your wretched Mephistopheles, throughout twenty-four years, an unresting combination of the schoolmaster, of the touring agency, and of the Queries and Answers column in a newspaper. One rather pities the poor devil; and suspects that, when the harsh term of his servitude was over, he retired to hell completely outworn. One is quite sure that he never again undertook the arduous task of damning a philosopher.

Meanwhile you acquired knowledge. You observed the cities

and the customs of many men, making a grand tour of the planet in fifteen days, like an excessive Phineas Fogg, and yet later recombining the principal and most famous lands of the world, with particular attention to all public buildings which Baedeker, if granted this privilege thus early in earth's history, would most certainly have starred. The amenities of Paradise also you inspected "from the least distance whence all men whosoever are denied to come any nearer." The Garden of Eden was lighted upon this occasion, for your special convenience, by "a mighty clear strike of fire coming from heaven." It is not recorded how Mephistopheles secured this supernal act of politeness. You visited hell also, with what appears rather morbid haste. But, above all, you asked questions of Mephistopheles.

You asked him, for example, about Lucifer's first fall and the events leading thereunto; about how to interpret dreams; about predestination and pigeon training and the construction of an archangel's sword. You inquired about the several planets, and the true nature of fire, air, water, and earth, and all that which is contained in any one of them. You asked questions about comets and ghosts and salamanders. You likewise required Mephistopheles to tell you how to possess Helen of Troy, to remove superfluous hairs without shaving, to catch fish with your hands, to mine precious stones, to read the lost comedies of Terence and Plautus, to ride abroad on a beer barrel, to open locked doors, and to cut off a man's leg without giving him pain. You asked in the same breath for an explanation of thunder and for a reliable method to procure fresh fruits during the winter months. And the poor devil, Sir, had to answer every one of these questions, along with an endless number of yet other questions, at full length, day after day, for twenty-four years hand-running, or else bid you go to heaven.

So then did you acquire knowledge ruthlessly, until time released the tormented fiend from your eternal question-asking. He wrung your neck forthwith, in the year 1539, at Staufen in the Breisgau; dashed out your brains and your teeth; and flung down your mangled corpse, from a second story window, to a manure heap in the stable yard. One does not defend such extremities; but, upon the whole, one does understand them, provided that devils possess any least share of human nature. In fact, one rather admires the tenacity of Mephistopheles. No merely mortal being, no seraph, could have put up with your eternal question-asking for a whole twenty-four years. . . . At all events, Sir, thus ended your quest of universal knowledge—in a manure heap.

Well, and Christopher Marlowe fished you out of it, without ever grasping your true nature. For this Marlowe made of you a poet. He assumed as a plain matter of course that a philosopher's main interests must be vested in poetry and in Helen of Troy and in riotous living and in yet other unphilosophical exercises. He imagined that you desired mere supernatural powers and mere superhuman indulgences, thrusting into a mouth adapted only to question-asking a vast number of unprovable, if highly poetic, direct statements. It would never have occurred to you, for instance, to declare, "A sound magician is a demi-god"—not to you, who looked upon magic more practically, as a postgraduate course in one's education. And if ever you, Sir, had thought to inquire, "Was this the face that launched a thousand ships?" you would have gone on immediately to ask about their names, captains, commissariat arrangements, and tonnage.

Goethe, himself a bit of a pedant, understood you far better. Goethe quite clearly saw that you wanted to fathom, in one stunted human lifetime, all the secrets of heaven and earth, and of hell also. But, alas, Sir, it was Goethe who first involved you with that Margaret whom Gounod somewhat later gallicized into Marguerite, with the attendant necessity of making you a tenor who can sing

the "*Salut demeure*" acceptably.

"What has Margaret to do with Faust?" asked Charles Lamb and I do not think anybody has ever answered him. For one, I simply cannot imagine your perturbed embarrassment, Dr. Faustus, were you to learn that the world at large now remembers you as an elderly nincompoop who gave up his soul's salvation in order to seduce an underbred working-girl. It is not to be denied, in view of your sextuple achievements in the Sultan of Turkey's seraglio that upon occasion you could distinguish yourself as a loose liver yet were all such affairs but the *hors d'œuvres* in a continuous orgy of knowledge-guzzling. Mere women you took casually, even Helen. For at bottom you wanted only, let it be repeated, knowledge. So you got your knowledge, at the one possible if somewhat stiff price and having got it, you carried off your unparalleled knowledge, triumphantly, to your manure heap. It was permitted you to reflect in the same instant that Mephistopheles was dashing out your brains that these were the best-stocked brains ever exercised by a descendant of Adam. You had found out the exact truth about everything.

In this way did you obtain too as happy an outcome for any human endeavor as a philosopher could reasonably expect. But to be made, willy-nilly, and without so much as a voice test, the tenor in an out-of-date opera, Sir, is an affliction well beyond reason. It is also a predicament for which no school of philosophy, in so far as I know, has suggested a cure.