

Robert Southey (1774-1843)

11 *The Painter of Florence*

Part I

There once was a Painter in Catholic days,
Like Job, who eschewed all evil;
Still on his Madonnas the curious may gaze
With applause and amazement, but chiefly his praise
And delight was in painting the Devil. 5

They were angels, compared to the devils he drew,
Who besieged poor St. Anthony's cell;
Such burning hot eyes, such a damnable hue,
You could even smell brimstone, their breath was so blue,
He painted his devils so well. 10

And now had the Artist a picture begun,
'Twas over the Virgin's church door;
She stood on the dragon embracing her son:
Many devils already the Artist had done,
But this must outdo all before. 15

The old Dragon's imps, as they fled through the air,
At seeing it, paused on the wing,
For he had the likeness so just to a hair,
That they came as Apollyon himself had been there,
To pay their respects to their king. 20

Every child, at beholding it, shiver'd with dread,
And scream'd, as he turned away quick;
Not an old woman saw it, but, raising her head,
Dropp'd a bead, made a cross on her wrinkles, and said,
— "God help me from ugly Old Nick!" — 25

What the Painter so earnestly thought on by day,
He sometimes would dream of by night;
But once he was startled, as sleeping he lay,

'Twas no fancy, no dream — he could plainly survey
That the Devil himself was in sight. 30

— “You rascally dauber,” old Beelzebub cries,
“Take heed how you wrong me again!
“Though your caricatures for myself I despise,
“Make me handsomer now in the multitude’s eyes,
“Or see if I threaten in vain! — 35

Now the painter was bold, and religious beside,
And on faith he had certain reliance;
So earnestly he all his countenance eyed,
And thank’d him for sitting, with Catholic pride,
And sturdily bade him defiance. 40

Betimes in the morning the Painter arose,
He is ready as soon as ’tis light;
Every look, every line, every feature he knows,
'Tis fresh in his eye, to his labour he goes,
And he has the old wicked one quite. 45

Happy man, he is sure the resemblance can’t fail,
The tip of the nose is red hot,
There’s his grin and his fangs, his skin cover’d with scale,
And that — the identical curl of his tail,
Not a mark, not a claw is forgot. 50

He looks, and retouches again with delight;
'Tis a portrait complete to his mind!
He touches again, and again feeds his sight,
He looks round for applause, and he sees, with affright,
The original standing behind. 55

— “Fool! idiot!” old Beelzebub grinn’d as he spoke,
And stamp’d on the scaffold in ire;
The Painter grew pale, for he knew it no joke,
'Twas a terrible height, and the scaffolding broke;
The Devil could wish it no higher. 60

— “Help! help me! O Mary!” he cried in alarm,
As the scaffold sunk under his feet.

From the canvas the Virgin extended her arm,
She caught the good Painter, she saved him from harm,
There were thousands who saw in the street. 65

The old Dragon fled when the wonder he 'spied,
And cursed his own fruitless endeavour;
While the Painter call'd after, his rage to deride,
Shook his pallet and brushes in triumph, and cried,
— "Now I'll paint thee more ugly than ever!" — 70

Part II

The Painter so pious all praise had acquired,
For defying the malice of hell:
The Monks the unerring resemblance admired,
Not a lady lived near but her portrait desired
From one who succeeded so well. 75

One there was to be painted, the number among,
Of features most fair to behold,
The country around of fair Marguerite rung;
Marguerite she was lovely, and lively, and young,
Her husband was ugly and old. 80

Oh! Painter, avoid her! Oh! Painter, take care!
For Satan is watchful for you!
Take heed, lest you fall in the wicked one's snare,
The net is made ready — Oh! Painter, beware
Of Satan and Marguerite too! 85

She seats herself now, now she lifts up her head,
On the Artist she fixes her eyes;
The colours are ready, the canvas is spread,
He lays on the white, and he lays on the red,
And the features of beauty arise. 90

He is come to her eyes, eyes so bright and so blue,
There's a look that he cannot express,
His colours are dull to their quick-sparkling hue,
More and more on the lady he fixes his view,

On the canvas he looks less and less. 95

In vain he retouches, her eye sparkles more,
And that look that fair Marguerite gave:
Many devils the Artist had painted of yore,
But he never attempted an Angel before,
St. Anthony help him, and save! 100

He yielded, alas! for the truth must be told,
To the woman, the tempter, and fate;
It was settled, the Lady so fair to behold,
Should elope from her husband, so ugly and old,
With the Painter so pious of late. 105

Now Satan exults in his vengeance complete,
To the husband he makes the scheme known;
Night comes, and the lovers impatiently meet,
Together they fly, they are seized in the street,
And in prison the Painter is thrown. 110

With Repentance, his only companion, he lies,
And a dismal companion is she.
On a sudden he saw the old Serpent arise;
— “You villainous dauber,” old Beelzebub cries,
“You are paid for your insults to me. 115

“But my too tender heart it is easy to move,
“If to what I propose you agree.
“That picture — be fair! the resemblance improve,
“Make a handsomer picture — your chains I’ll remove,
“And you shall this instant be free.” — 120

Overjoy’d, the condition so easy he hears,
— “I’ll make you more handsome,” — he said.
He sees that his chain on the Devil appears,
Released from his prison, released from his fears,
The Painter lies snug in his bed. 125

At morn he arises, composes his look,
And proceeds to his work as before:
The people beheld him, the culprit they took,

They thought that the Painter his prison had broke,
And to prison they led him once more. 130

They open the dungeon — behold in his place,
In the corner, old Beelzebub lay:
He smirks, and he smiles, and he leers with a grace,
That the Painter might catch all the charms of his face,
Then vanish'd in lightning away. 135

Quoth the Painter — “I trust you’ll suspect me no more,
“Since you find my denial was true;
“But I’ll alter the picture above the church-door,
“For I never saw Satan so closely before —
“And I must give the Devil his due.” — 140

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