

Robert Southey (1774-1843)

18 *A True Ballad of St. Antidius, the Pope, and the Devil*

It is Antidius the Bishop
Who now at even tide,
Taking the air and saying a prayer,
Walks by the river side.

The Devil had business that evening, 5
And he upon earth would go;
For it was in the month of August,
And the weather was close below.

He had his books to settle,
And up to earth he hied, 10
To do it there in the evening air,
All by the river side.

His imps came flying around him,
Of his affairs to tell;
From the north, and the south, and the east, and the west: 15
They brought him the news that he liked best,
Of the things they had done,
And the souls they had won,
And how they sped well
In the service of Hell. 20

There came a devil posting in
Return'd from his employ,
Seven years had he been gone from Hell,
And now he came grinning for joy.

“Seven years,” quoth he, “of trouble and toil 25
Have I labour'd the Pope to win;
And I to-day have caught him,
He hath done a deadly sin!”
And then he took the Devil's book,
And wrote the deed therein. 30

Oh, then King Beelzebub for joy,
He drew his mouth so wide,
You might have seen his iron teeth,
Four and forty from side to side.

He wagg'd his ears, he twisted his tail, 35
He knew not for joy what to do,
In his hoofs and his horns, in his heels and his corns,
It tickled him all through.

The Bishop who beheld all this,
Straight how to act bethought him; 40
He leapt upon the Devil's back,
And by the horns he caught him.

And he said a Pater-noster
As fast as he could say,
And made a cross on the Devil's head, 45
And bade him to Rome away.

Away, away, the Devil flew,
All through the clear moonlight;
I warrant who saw them on their way
He did not sleep that night. 50

Without bridle, or saddle, or whip, or spur,
Away they go like the wind;
The beads of the Bishop are hanging before,
And the tail of the Devil behind.

They met a Witch and she hail'd them 55
As soon as she came within call;
"Ave Maria!" the Bishop exclaim'd,
It frightened her broomstick and she got a fall.

He ran against a shooting star,
So fast for fear did he sail, 60
And he singed the beard of the Bishop
Against a Comet's tail;

And he pass'd between the horns of the Moon,
With Antidius on his back;

And there was an eclipse that night, 65
Which was not in the Almanack.

The Bishop just as they set out,
To tell his beads begun;
And he was by the bed of the Pope
Before the string was done. 70

The Pope fell down upon his knees,
In terror and confusion,
And he confess'd the deadly sin,
And he had absolution.

And all the Popes in bliss that be, 75
Sung, O be joyful! then;
And all the Popes in bale that be,
They howl'd for envy then;
For they before kept jubilee,
Expecting his good company, 80
Down in the Devil's den.

But what was this the Pope had done
To bind his soul to Hell?
Ah! that is the mystery of this wonderful history,
And I wish that I could tell! 85

But would you know, there you must go,
You can easily find the way;
It is a broad and a well-known road
That is travell'd by night and by day.

And you must look in the Devil's book; 90
You will find one debt that was never paid yet
If you search the leaves throughout;
And that is the mystery of this wonderful history,
And the way to find it out.

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