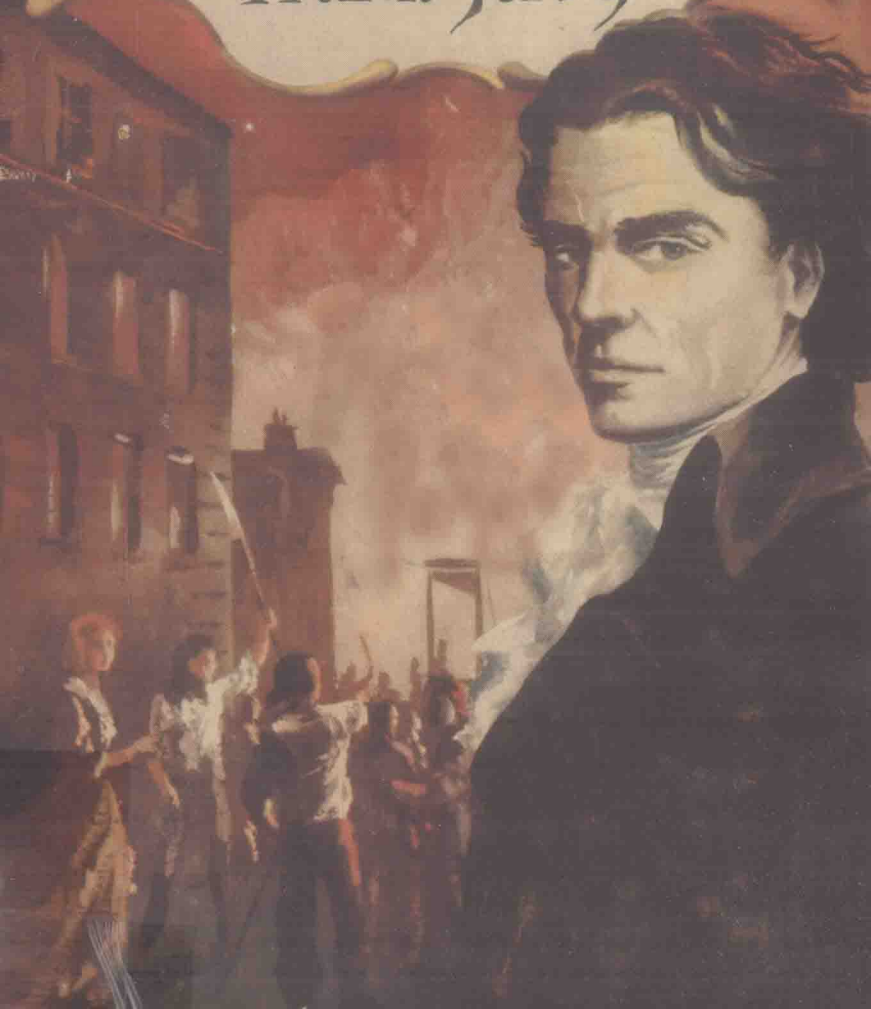


美小说 THE
DEVIL'S LAUGHTER
Frank Yerby



THE DEVIL'S LAUGHTER

by

Frank Yerby

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Jean Paul Marin is the tall and handsome son of a rich merchant. But he and his father quarrel over Jean's hot-headed revolutionary writings, and still more bitterly over his sister's coming marriage to the Comte de Gravereau. For Jean's face bears a scar—a souvenir of the Comte's private prison.

Caught up in the Revolution, Jean, the whilom country lawyer, becomes the intimate of Danton himself. And into his life, already passionate and complicated, three women bring their tangled skein of treachery, jealousy—and love.

THE DEVIL'S LAUGHTER

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FRANK YERBY

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A WOMAN CALLED FANCY

THE SARACEN BLADE

THE DEVIL'S LAUGHTER

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I

"It's been a long time," Lucienne Talbot said.

Jean Paul looked at her.

"Sorry?" he said.

"Yes!" Lucienne said. "Yes, yes, yes! I'm sick of this. . . ."

Jean looked around the room. All the light came from the fireplace though it was still late afternoon outside. The fire glow flickered on the brown walls, washed the copperware with warmth. He saw the cooking-pot on the fire, smelled the little fish bubbling in the stew. The copper pots gleamed. He could see his own face in them, a little distorted, all planes and angles. His black eyes looked huge.

Lucienne stood up, the motion abrupt but not ungraceful. He could see her tawny hair reflected in the copper pans. Nothing she ever does is ungraceful, he thought. And she should always be washed in firelight—as now.

The firelight made a painting: the crusty loaves on the table with the wine and the cheese; the bellows, the tongs, the andirons in their places; the sudden, yellow-white glow of the pillow-case on the little bed, half hidden behind the screen.

"I like it," Jean Paul said.

"You like anything! I—I didn't start out with you for this, Jean Paul Marin! Not to hide in an attic. Not to live in fear of the police. Not to become your mistress. No, something more shameful than even a mistress, because men are sometimes proud of their mistresses."

"I'm proud of you," Jean Paul said.

"I doubt it!" Lucienne spat. "You'd think I was old and ugly. You never take me anywhere. You hide me here in this filthy hole. Name of a name! I don't know why I ever took up with you, Jean!"

"Why did you?" Jean Paul said.

"I don't know! God knows you're nothing to look at. And as for brains—a millstone couldn't be any thicker than whatever that is you have between your ears. Talents? None. Prospects? Many. I'll name them for you——"

"Don't bother," Jean Paul said.

"You don't want to hear them, do you, Jean Marin? Not very

pleasant—your prospects, since they start with being hanged for high treason and end with being drawn and quartered! I still don't see why I ever . . .”

Jean smiled again. His smile was something. It did things to his face, making it almost handsome.

“You said it was because you loved me,” he said.

“I lied! Or I was a fool. Or both. Yes, both. When I think of my career . . .”

“What career?” Jean Paul said cruelly.

“Oh, you! I would have had a career, but for you. Men looked at me. Noblemen. I didn't dance badly, and I was improving. . . .”

“Then I came along. Jean Paul Marin, son of Henri Marin, the shipowner. Richest man on the whole Côte d'Azur. Sure that had nothing to do with it, *chérie*?”

She stared at him. The firelight was in the hazel eyes that changed colour with the weather, or the dress she was wearing, making them yellow. Like a tigress, Jean thought.

“Yes,” she said, “that had something to do with it. That had everything to do with it. I thought I'd wear velvet and be covered with diamonds. Why else would I have accepted you?”

“Sorry I disappointed you,” Jean Paul said.

“I knew your father was a straitlaced old vulture. But you said he'd get used to the idea of your being married to an actress. . . .”

“A dancer,” Jean corrected.

“What's the difference? Anyhow I didn't think that two years later I still wouldn't be married to you, that I'd still be risking disgrace—and for what?”

“My father is—difficult,” Jean sighed.

“Difficult? He's impossible! But you're worse. You with your revolutionary cant. You fool! Can't you see that the world you're trying to destroy is the only one I can make my way in? Or you—for that matter. Destroy privilege and you rid France of all the men rich enough and grand enough to offer patronage.”

“I don't need patronage,” Jean Paul said. “All I want is justice.”

“Hang justice! And you're still depending upon patronage. If it weren't for your father, you couldn't even afford this miserable hole.”

Jean Paul stared at her. After two years he still had that feeling, looking at her. He hurt. This tall, tawny one. This untamed one with the grace of a great cat. And the claws.

“I've had enough,” she said. “I should be dancing at the

Opéra by now—acting at the Comédie Française. And I will, too! In spite of you, Jean Paul!”

“By whose patronage?” Jean said. “The Comte de Grave-reau’s? But such men as he demand a price. What are you prepared to pay?”

“That’s my business,” she said flatly. “But as far as the price is concerned, I’ll tell you that. The same price, my Jeannot, I bought you with—Good enough?”

“Too good,” Jean Paul said.

He looked at her, seeing her cheeks flushed in the firelight, the good bones of her face, her cheek-bones high, angular, causing her hazel eyes to slant a little, the mouth full, pouting, so that he could almost feel it, the long, slim, good legs, moulding the peasant’s dress she wore, and suddenly he wanted her. Or rather he wanted her more acutely than usual, because he wanted her all the time.

He came over to her.

“Don’t touch me!” she snarled at him.

But he put up his big hands and caught her, hurting her arms, and she threw herself backward away from him, turning her face from side to side so that he had to bring one of his hands up and catch her chin, holding it so hard that he bruised her a little.

Her mouth was ice. But it didn’t stay like that. It never did. That was the one thing that was left between them after all the quarrelling.

He could feel it moving under his, forming words that came out muffled, but not fighting any more, not drawing away, whispering: “You beast! Damn your eyes, Jeannot, my Jeannot, I hate you, you know me too well, too well, my Jeannot, oh damn you, let me go!”

But he didn’t let her go and her mouth wasn’t making sounds any more, but it was still moving, softening upon his, moving, clinging, opening under the steady pressure, and the whole of her made one long caress, scalding through the layers of clothing.

She was aware suddenly that he was laughing. He thrust her away from him, hard, holding her at arm’s length, by the shoulders, and his clear baritone laughter rang among the rafters. It was one of the many things he could do that were absolutely fiendish.

“You dog!” she whispered. “Dog and son of a dog! How could you. . . .”

He looked at her and his black eyes were alight with laughter and with malice.

"This way," he said, "I know you will always be waiting for my return."

Then he picked up a bundle of manuscripts from the table and started for the door.

Lucienne stared at him.

"But, Jeannot, your supper?" she said, and her voice was almost tender.

"I'm not hungry," he laughed. "Except, perhaps, for love."

Then he went out of the door and closed it softly behind him.

Lucienne stood there a long time, staring at the door. Then, very slowly, she smiled.

"There has always been more than one purveyor of that commodity, my Jeannot," she said softly. Then she turned back to the fire.

Jean Paul Marin stopped at the edge of the road leading up to the village and looked at the sky. He stood there only a few minutes, but while he watched, the clouds that had been piling up all afternoon over the Mediterranean ran together so that there wasn't any blue left and the little talking wind got a noise into it like crying. The colours went out of everything, leaving the world etched in greys, and the wind went searching along the land with a moaning sound until the trees were bending over before it and Jean knew what it was.

The mistral. He hated the mistral with that curious kind of hatred he had for all the things he couldn't understand. He wasn't superstitious, but he knew that the mistral did things to people. It was an ugly, nervous wind and it went on day and night without stopping sometimes for weeks and things happened because of that wind. There would be tavern brawls in the village and peasant wives would be beaten, and if, as usually happened this time of year, the supply of white bread failed—there might even be a few minor *Jacqueries* . . . even—murders. For the mistral always whispered things into a man's heart that shouldn't be there.

He stood there a moment, listening to the wind. It tugged at his cloak and whipped his hair about his face, and little prickly things crawled up and down his spine. Every fear he had spoke to him out of it. Every hate. He could hear Lucienne's voice in it, saying the things she had said to him that night a week ago, when he had come into the Inn and found her seated across the table from the Comte de Gravereau, both her small hands imprisoned in his noble clasp.

Jean had started towards them. But at the last moment Gervais la Moyte, Comte de Gravereau, had stood up, laughing. Lucienne got up more slowly. She was smiling. Then the Comte bowed over her hand and was gone.

Jean came up to her and stood beside her. It was a long time before she noticed he was there. When she did, she saw the pain in his eyes.

She had smiled at him then. Wound her fingers through his hair.

"Don't be silly, Jean," she said; "I'm quite accustomed to pleasantries from that sort of gallant. You mustn't mind. It's one of the risks of my art. . . ."

"Lucienne," he had said thickly.

"I prefer," she murmured, "someone solid and—and real—like you, my Jeannot."

But all the time her eyes had kept straying towards that door.

Hearing the sound of her voice, remembered now in the mistral, the pain Jean Paul felt was physical, real.

"*Merde!* he screamed aloud into the teeth of the wind, and plodded on, up the hill.

He was twenty years old that November day of 1784, and, physically, he wasn't very imposing. He was well above average height, but he was very thin. His hands and feet didn't fit the rest of him. His mouth was too big, too; but he wasn't ugly. His mouth saved him from that—his big, wide, mobile mouth that always looked as if it was going to laugh—and usually did. But his laughter was strange. It was filled with mockery for all things under earth and heaven, even for himself. His sister, Thérèse, called it devil's laughter, and hated the sound of it.

He had a good nose, straight and thin and a little arched, and his eyes were very fine. They were big and black and laughing, and they had lights in them—mocking lights. His hair hadn't any lights. It was black, too, and hung down uncombed and unpowdered to his shoulders. The whole of him made a discordant ensemble that people found vaguely disturbing. Lucienne, for instance, said he was an *enragé*, a madman, and that he had fierce eyes.

That wasn't true. They were wild sometimes—with pain, with passion, but most of the time they were filled with malicious glee at the follies of mankind. Sometimes, when he was alone, they were deep and dark and brooding—a little haunted. His walk, his way of carrying himself, was just like the rest of his family's so that anyone could recognise the Marins even at a

distance; but his face was different. Only those men born strangers into their world have faces like that.

He was. He couldn't accept it.

"Jean Paul," the Abbé Grégoire said, "will either be destroyed by life—or he'll change it. There won't be any compromises."

As usual, the Abbé Grégoire was right.

He walked on now, into the teeth of the mistral. He hated that wind, but, like all the things he hated, it had for him a perverse fascination. He was like that. Everything he disliked had in it some quality which excited his admiration.

Even Gervais la Moyte, Comte de Graveveau.

I'll kill him, he thought, bending over against the wind. I'll stick an épée into his guts and twist it. . . . But at the same time that wickedly honest part of his mind he had no control over whispered: You'd give your soul to be like him, wouldn't you, Jean Paul Marin? To be tall as he is and fair with laughing blue eyes—to be witty and gay—to ride like him, to dance, to whisper words like little pearls into a woman's ear. . . . Wouldn't you, Jean Paul? Wouldn't you?

And, straightening up, he loosed his laughter. The wind took it, snatching it away from his lips, leaving them moving soundlessly, his whole body jerking with laughter.

"Jean Paul Marin," he laughed, "you're a fool!"

He went on then, up the steep path towards the village perched like a crow's nest on the mountain-top, bending over once more before the wind, holding his tricorne on his head with one hand and gathering his cloak together with the other.

Before he was half-way there, it started to rain. The rain came down in sheets, slanting before the wind, and in two minutes he was soaked to the skin. But he didn't increase his pace. He took a queer, dark pleasure in his discomfort. The rain was like needles of ice, and the mistral talked through it. Here, higher up, the trees were different from the ones on the shore of the Mediterranean. They had leaves that could change colour, could fall.

The leaves went whipping before the wind, and collected in the roadside ditches, become torrents now, and hurtled down the mountain-side with the water. The road was paved with cobblestones, glistening with the rain, and it was hard to keep his footing. He slipped time and again, but he went on doggedly.

Then he was walking the crooked streets of the little village. Even in that rain there were a few people about, wrapped in their rags, and when they turned at the sound of his good boots on the stones, he could see the hunger in their eyes. Saint Jule,

the village, was like many another village in France, rather better off, in fact, than most, but every time Jean Paul saw it he wanted to curse. Or cry. It was the domain of the Comte de Graverau, usually busy at the elaborate idleness of Versailles.

Except now, Jean thought bitterly, when he has more important things to do!

But the Comte's bailiffs and the local farmer-general of taxes were not idle. Jean Paul saw an old woman, stooping in the rain, carefully picking up one by one the chicken feathers that the rain had washed from someone else's yard and left before her door.

It was, he knew, a matter of life and death with her. The feathers meant to the collectors that she could afford to eat fowl, and therefore her assessment could be increased. What she paid now, left her on the edge of starvation. Any increase would be a death sentence. A slow death, but very certain.

He stopped beside her and helped her at the task. His fingers were young and nimble. He made short work of it.

She smiled at him out of her lined face, and part of the wetness of her cheeks was tears.

"My thanks, M'sieur," she said.

Jean looked at her. He wondered, idly, how old she was. He knew she was probably many years short of the sixty she looked, but when he asked her, her answer shocked him.

"Twenty-eight, M'sieur," the old woman said.

He fumbled in his pocket and came out with a louis d'or. But the woman shook her head.

"Haven't you any little money, M'sieur?" she said. "Where could I change a louis? At the grocer's, the butcher's? You know better, M'sieur. With my lord's spies about, were I to come in with such a fortune, the bailiffs would be waiting at my door before I reached home again."

Jean Paul put the louis back and came out with a handful of écus and sous—all the small change he had. It was much less than the louis d'or he offered her, but she was better off with less. At least, by using extreme caution, she could spend the smaller coins. They would last her weeks—even months.

She dropped the money into a big pocket in her skirt. Then she seized both his hands and covered them with kisses. Jean stood there and took it, the pain moving inside his heart.

"It won't always be like this," he growled.

"I know, M'sieur," she whispered, "but I won't live to see it."

Jean walked on slowly. He was going to the house of Pierre du Pain, his partner in crime. Pierre was perfect for the task.

No one would ever dream that this droll fellow, commonly supposed to be mad, was a printer, and an expert one at that. Nor was there anything strange in the association of Jean Paul Marin and the man he himself had hired as night watchman for certain of the Marin warehouses. That these warehouses contained a printing press, paper, ink, and other supplies, nobody knew—not even Henri Marin. All the authorities and the infuriated nobility did know was that someone was flooding the whole Côte d'Azur with quite treasonable pamphlets, written with diabolical skill. For their telling style, Jean Paul was responsible. For the printing, Pierre. . . .

But he never got to Pierre's house. For as he turned the last corner, he saw Raoul, his manservant, running towards him.

"M'sieur Jean!" Raoul called breathlessly. "By all the Saints, I have searched the whole world over for you!"

Jean mocked him with his eyes.

"That is grave," he smiled. "This is something of importance, doubtless?"

"Of the gravest importance," Raoul panted. "Your respected sister, Mademoiselle Thérèse, demands to see you. She warned me not to return without you. . . ."

"*Enfer!*" Jean swore. Then he smiled again. His little sister was very dear to him. "Very well, Raoul," he said, "I'll come."

Thérèse was waiting for him at the big iron gate of the Villa Marin. She was wrapped in a cloak, but her head was bare. Down here, on the Côte itself, the rain had stopped, and even the mistral was only a murmur.

At the sight of him she stamped her tiny foot.

"Jean, Jean," she cried, "how you do try my patience! We have been waiting for you for hours."

Jean looked at his sister. Thérèse Marin was small, like all the Marins. But unlike Henri Marin, her father, and Bertrand, her eldest brother, she had a kind of delicate beauty, inherited from the mother who had died in giving her birth. Of them all, only Jean Paul was like her; for in him, too, the basic coarseness of the Marins had been refined.

But now his gift for mockery got the better of him. He made her a sweeping bow.

"I am at your command, Mademoiselle," he said dryly, "or is it——" he paused, splitting the word deliberately into two syllables, "Ma Dame Thérèse, Comtesse de Gravereau?"

Thérèse looked at him. Her eyes were the exact duplicates of his own—except that they had no mockery in them, but only tenderness.

"Jean," she said gently, "why must you be like this? So—so prickly. Why can't you accept life as it is?"

"Because," Jean said, "I'm me. Because, my little sister, I happen to love you. And because I don't like to see pearls cast before swine."

"Jean Paul!" Thérèse said.

"That hurts, doesn't it, little sister? The truth always does. Gervais la Moyte, Comte de Gravereau—very fine, eh? But strip away those titles, those pretty, meaningless words, and what have you left? Gervais la Moyte, blackguard. Gervais la Moyte, roué, drunkard, gamester. And we're supposed to make a leg before such a man. I read for the law; I finished the Lycée, and afterwards the University. I've forgotten more than that man has ever known. For what, then, do I owe him homage? Because some ancestor of his was a brigand who built a castle near a bridge or at a cross-road and made himself rich and powerful by thievery? They are still all thieves, your fine nobles! And I, for one, would make an end to them!"

Thérèse put her hands over her ears.

"I won't listen to you," she said.

"Ah, but you will," Jean laughed. "You, and ultimately all the world. You know, don't you, why he is here? No, don't tell me that, not the simple answer. To ask our father for your hand—that, of course. But why, Thérèse? Name of heaven, why?"

"Because," Thérèse said, "because I am pretty and good and he loves me. . . ."

"Name of a name! Thérèse, how can you be so stupid? There are any number of noblewomen who are pretty. There may even be a few among them who are good, though that I doubt. You've seen this man. You know how proud he is. Why then would he sully his ancient line with the blood of commoners? The answer is simple, my poor Thérèse. Because he is poor and we are rich. Like all his arrogant breed, he thought his lands, his feudal dues, rents, *corvées*, *traites*, *lods et ventes*, *plais-à-marcis*, *banvins*, and a thousand others would last him for ever. He dreamed of spending more than his income for the rest of his life without going into bankruptcy."

Thérèse stood there, looking at her brother. But she didn't interrupt him.

"All over France, now, the lines are crumbling. And always for this same reason. We bourgeois are intelligent, patient, industrious. And the nobles are too proud, too indolent, to engage in trade. All France is sunk in ruin because of them. The King,

without knowing it, is as ruined as the rest. They try expedients now—anything to save themselves. The King makes great offices with rich stipends and no duties, but even that cannot save them all.

“So now, if you are Gervais la Moyte, what must you do? How can you keep up your châteaux, your stables, your gaming, wenching, your assorted mistresses from the Opéra and the Comédie? Simple, my boy, why didn’t I think of it before? That Simone de Beauvieux, old Marquis de Beauvieux’ eldest daughter—didn’t she save the old man by marrying into a maritime family? Rich *canaille*, fat, stupid oxen—with, I grant you, a certain head for trade. . . . Let’s see, now, what was their name? Martine—Marin, that’s it! Now, wasn’t there something about a daughter? Probably bovine and dull; but still, my old one, the sacrifice must be made. . . .”

“Stop it!” Thérèse screamed at him. “You stop it this instant, Jean!”

He looked at her. She was crying.

“I’m sorry, Thérèse,” he said, “I didn’t mean to make you cry.”

He bent and kissed her gently. She stopped crying after a few minutes—smiled at him.

“Come,” she said, “Father sent for you.”

Jeal Paul stiffened.

“Why?” he growled.

“M’sieur le Comte is leaving us. Father wants you there so that we might all say good-bye properly.”

“Leaving us?” Jean said.

“Yes. He has asked for my hand—and—and has been accepted. Father feels that the whole family should show him every courtesy—now.”

“I’ll see him turning on a spit above a bed of coals in hell first!” Jean roared. “Thérèse, how could you?”

“Because I am a woman,” Thérèse whispered. “And Gervais is very fair; you must admit that, Jean.”

Jean Paul stared at his sister.

“You’re trying to tell me that you love this *cochon*?” he got out. “That’s it, Thérèse?”

Thérèse bowed her head.

“That’s it, Jean,” she whispered. “I love him—I do, oh, I do!”

“The sweet blue eyes of God!” Jean swore.

“You mustn’t swear, Jean,” Thérèse said gently. “He’s going to try to do better. He promised me that. I had heard of his evil ways—I—I taxed him with them. He admitted quite freely