



## The Devil His Due

by Maya Kaathryn Bohnhoff

*It is incumbent upon every man of insight and understanding to strive to translate that which hath been written into reality and action... —Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*

THE DEVIL HIS DUE was originally published in *Amazing Stories*. It is reprinted in *I LOVED THY CREATION*, a collection of my short fiction. It has nothing to do with the literal existence of a devil and everything to do with how we make use of the resources we're given. You'll see how the above quote applies when you read the story.

oOo

Herbert G. (Bert) Wells stared at the dog-eared manila envelope numbly. This was the fifth time—the *fifth time*—OF BLOOD DARK SKIES had ricocheted off New York City like a badly aimed bullet and ended up buried deep in his mailbox. Gut shot, he shambled down the hallway of his Boston brownstone apartment building, his face wearing the same blank look of despair and puzzlement he'd seen on the homeless wrecks he usually stepped over on the way upstairs.

Down the battered corridor a door opened. Bert froze. Jack Baddely (aka, The Jackass) stepped out into the hall, then swung back to lock his door. Bert thrust the misshapen package under the lapel of his coat and tacked a garish grin to his face.

"Hi, Jack," he said, his voice as bright as the paisleys on his tie.

"Oh, hi, Bertie. How's the writing life? Any news on your block buster no-vel?" He always said "novel" as if it was some bastardized French word. (It was actually bastardized Italian).

Bert flattered himself that his smile did not slip an inch. "No news is good news," he said, hurrying past.

"Yeah. Or it could mean the editor ran out of kindling."

His back to The Jackass, Bert's face went into a litany of rude expressions.

"Or maybe he needed a door stop."

Bert kept walking.

“A paper weight?”

Bert made his apartment door and opened it, trying, unsuccessfully, to ignore the raspy chuckle digging, stiletto sharp, into his unguarded back.

“Jackass,” he muttered and hurled the door open. He slammed it shut again behind him and threw the manuscript onto the sofa.

The frayed, stressed manila split at the seams, spilling its contents from the sofa cushions onto the bare wood floor. Snide chuckles sprayed from the ruptured package and scurried to find hiding places in the room. They would emerge later to scoff at him. He’d hear them as he labored at his second-hand laptop—sneaking out from nook and cranny, scuffling among the dust-‘bunnies, tittering at the man who would be King.

He ignored the litter on the sofa long enough to brew an industrial strength pot of coffee, climb into his sweats and sit down, cup in hand, to assess the mess. After three sips, he was able to pick up the rejection letter and read it. It was a form job, but the editor had scrawled a hand-written message beneath the neatly printed kiss-off.

“Nice, tight style,” it said, “but has no one told you that horror with a social conscience is a dead art form? Not even The King could sell this stuff in this day and age. Can the meta-physical crap. Give the market what it wants—try cyber-shock.”

A dead art form, indeed. It matched, Bert thought, the social conscience of the age. Deader than a doornail—whatever the heck a doornail was. Cyber-shock! An AI droid could write cyber-shock: Tales of senseless carnage perpetrated by mindless machines or crazed cyber-men. Luddite rubbish! The publishing industry was clearly in the hands of idiots.

*Great*, he thought. *Right*, he thought. Distract us with tales of impossible evils so we’ll forget about the possible ones—the *real* ones. Exorcising imaginary demons was always so much more gratifying than facing the real ones: Greed, corruption, injustice, excess. He could go on and on.

He checked his watch. Five-fifteen. Writer’s Group wasn’t for another two and a half



hours—a long time to wait to get this off his chest.

He sighed, supposing he could just go hang out at the coffee house and hope another of the undiscovered *literati* would wander by in need of a *kvetch*-mate. But if he did that, he'd have to drink more coffee and between the cup he'd just had and the two pots he'd consumed at work today, he was already in a caffeinated time warp. The High-flight Zone, the Group called it. He'd only seen one or two of his literary buddies when they weren't cranking along on a full charge of caffeine-induced adrenaline—it wasn't a pretty sight.

For about the two billionth time Bert considered “giving the market what it wanted.” He knew he could do it...well, at least, he was pretty sure he could. After all, he had it on good authority that he possessed a “nice, tight style.” He had every confidence—well, at least a sneaking suspicion, that if he sent that *bourgeoisie* establishment pig-dog editor a cyber-“shock novel, he'd woof it down like steak tartar—killer 'bots and all. *Luddite*. The anger peaked, sending him on a slow glide toward the abyss of despair. Who was he kidding? He couldn't write that crap. All that gore and sexual carnage—he just didn't have it in him. *Sure you do*, said a scoffing voice from left of center. *All human beings have it in 'em. You think you're an exception? Are you sure you wanna be? Look at the prize—PUBLICATION. MONEY. AUTONOMY. CELEBRITY. You got the tools, bwana. You can exploit the unreasonable fears of your fellow men and women right up there with the best of 'em.* Exploit? His brain braked in mid-meander. *My God*, he thought. *What are you thinking?* Exploit? Sell out? Pander to those antiquarian anarchists? This was a New Age. The publishing industry just hadn't caught up yet. If he just hung in there, stuck it out-

Bull hockey.

He put down the cup of coffee. Need to get out, he told himself. Need to get out and take a walk; clear the chuckling dust-bunnies out of my head.

He pulled on his coat, boots and a muffler, grabbed his portfolio and went out. Four aimless blocks later, he found himself wandering the River Charles. It was a much cleaner river than it had been last year at this same time and Bert tried to make that cause for celebration. A group of musicians had started that campaign, he recalled—a brigade of world-class rockers who had descended on New England like a plague of leather-clad locusts and bent the ears of every living thing in the Thirteen Colonies.

Rock musicians were not inclined to beat around the bush; the message was blunt and to the point: Man was out of tune with the environment. If he didn't get in tune instantly, the consequences would be devastating: Global warming, a new ice age, pollution toxemia—all frightening, but mere bagatelles compared to the real threat rammed home via synthesizer and power chord by the heroes of a new generation.



TEEN REVOLT.

The rock slogan “Tune It Or Die” took on a whole new meaning when emblazoned across the chest of your fifteen-year-old’s green globe-and-crossbones T-shirt.

Bert stared at the water. A month ago that had been one of his fondest recollections—a story he loved to tell whenever some formaldehyde guzzling nerdle elevated his snoot and opined that the arts were sheer frivol. Now, it only made him feel worse about his own inability to make any difference to the planet. In the two years since he’d left university, all he’d managed to contribute to society was a mountain of waste paper and enough shredded manila to fill the Prud up to the thirty-first floor.

He stared down at the swiftly moving Charles, chin quivering, eyes moist, anger shriveling. Despair and gloom perched on his sagging shoulders like the Twin Ravens of Doom—foul-smelling, heavy-toed birds with smug, knowing faces. They reminded him of two of his college professors, Bernhardt Brecht and Madlyn Carrey, who had both told him his propensity for crusading would ruin him as a writer of fiction, if (and it was a BIG IF) he could ever contrive to WRITE WELL. *Face it, he told himself, you’re a wimp. A noodle. A wet rag. Couldn’t write your way out of a recycled paper bag...in the driving rain, even. If you could write—really write—they’d publish OF BLOOD DARK SKIES if it was a multi-generational pot boiler. You, Herbert George Wells, are no credit to your namesake. You, sir, are a fake—a failure.*

The not-so-muddy river beckoned, singing the bawdy refrain of a song he was half a generation too young to remember. “Love that dirty water...”

Come on in, the water’s fine.

He sniffled, tucked his portfolio under one arm and swung a leg over the low stone parapet. Then he swung the other one over. He sat for a moment, facing the water, making his peace with the Universe.

Sorry, God, he apologized. I’m a wimp. But then, You already know that.

He contemplated the next morning's headlines: UNKNOWN SCHLOCK HORROR WRITER TAKES OWN LIFE.

What headline, beef brain? asked a disparaging voice from right of center. You'll be lucky to make the obits. Give us a break, here. Nobody knows who you are but those self-centered quease-in-arts you hang out with at the Espress-O. And they'll think you're some kind of idiot saint. Saint Herbert, Patron of Pansy-asses. Your mother didn't raise you right.

Herbert became highly offended at the disrespectful tenor of his thoughts. *Leave my mother out of this!*

That, Bert decided, would never do. He swung one leg back over the wall onto tarmac firma. He paused in mid-rage. Mother. Someone would have to tell his mother that her only son had kissed his ass goodbye and taken a header into the River Charles. She might even have to identify his body. What would she think? What would she do? He knew exactly what she'd think. She'd think she was a BAD MOTHER—a failure. She'd get depressed, maybe even...

Dufus, said the left-hand voice. Can't even do suicide right. I'm sure your mom loves having a zombie for a son. What does your boy do, Dr. Wells, Ph.D. in astrophysics, hmmm? Oh, my little Herbie, he recycles paper...lots of paper. Great, kid. Really great.

Bert wobbled, straddling the wall. A peculiar *whoosh-clickety-clickety* sound filled his brain and he thought for a moment he was headed for a psychotic Walter Mitty episode. He raised terrified eyes and met the curious ones of a kid speeding toward him on a powered skateboard. The kid and the *whoosh-clickety-clickety* both stopped right beside him.

"Geez, mon," the kid said, looking sincerely concerned, "You look like your Mom just died. What could be that bad?"

Bert blinked. "I can't write," he said, shocked into total honesty. "I'm a failure because I can't write cyber-shock."

The kid looked at him; he looked at the kid. A little globe and crossbones dangled from one earlobe and the letters "IT OR" were clearly visible on the patch of green T-shirt that peeked between the lapels of his black leathyl jacket.

"You know," the kid said finally, "there's an exceptionally good literacy program at the library."

Bert coughed. "Thanks."

The kid smiled. "Sure." He *whoosh-clickety'd* off, leaving Bert miserably alone.

The right-side voice was back, popping in like a fritzzy channel on a bunged stereo. *Some people, it said, can't even read.*

Bert swung the other leg over into the walkway. Yeah, he thought, and even I can do that. Maybe I could even teach other people to do that.

"Yeah? And where'll it get ya?"

Bert was trying to think of a comeback when he realized the voice had not come from inside his head. He looked up. Standing before him on the river walk was a short man in a fur-collared stressed leather coat, matching Gucci shoes, gloves and burgundy sharkskin pants. His hair was fashionably cut—a straight, glossy, lobe-length pageboy, black, obviously natural, center parted. He was handsome in an oily sort of way, and was smoking a red, spice-scented cigarette.

Bert found his eyes hypnotized by the glowing tip. Cigarettes were highly illegal. He only knew one person who smoked them—a beefy, middle-aged fictioneer who had been a correspondent during the last known war (years ago in Swaziland or someplace) and who thought he was the reincarnation of Ernest Hemingway.

"Want one?" asked the Smoker and held out a little ebony box. The cigarettes lay inside on black velvet.

"No. No, thanks."

The box disappeared.

"I asked a question, Jack," the guy said. "What'll it get ya, this literacy bunk?"

"I...I...I want to do something. Help somebody. Make a difference."

The Smoker laughed. It was an acrid sound. "And teachin' a bunch of snot-nosed ghetto geckoes how to read is gonna make a difference? Great. Yeah. They'll be able to read those little signs that say 'shoplifting will be prosecuted.' That way they'll know what they're bein' busted for. Get real, bwana. These guys are gonna be doin' their reading in a cage."

Bert stood. "Well, I'm going to do something with my life, dammit. I don't care if I have to write copy for the Salvation Army."

A gloved hand shot out and patted his arm, pushing him back onto the parapet. "Cool

your thrusters, Jack. I'm not saying you can't do nothin'. I'm sayin' I think you can do better."

"Do better? Look, who the hell are you, anyway, and where do you get off interrupting my private thoughts?" He glared fiercely at the little man, then felt the glare slip. Those really had been his private thoughts. His *silent*, private thoughts.

The Smoker rocked back on his well-heeled heels and grinned. "I wondered when you'd tumble to that. You're not a very quick study, Jack."

"My name isn't Jack, it's—"

"Yeah, yeah. I know. It's Herbert. Herbert G. Wells, named after the famous sci-fi writer. Your Mom is a big fan."

"Well, then why—"

He spread his hands. "It's just an expression."

"How do you know who I am? How do you know so much about me? Are you-?" Hope leapt in his breast. "Are you from the FBI—the CIA? Is that it? Is my writing too incendiary? Too dangerous?"

The man guffawed. "Dangerous? Criminy, kid! If you had *talent*, you'd be dangerous! As it is, you got nothin' but good intentions and a lot of gall. Dangerous, Saint Chris's keester! That's a yuck, bwana-san. A real yodel. Dangerous!" He chuckled, wiped tears from the corner of his eyes and wheezed down to silence.

Bert glared at him. "Get to the point. I have a meeting to go to."

"Oh, yeah, right. The Literary Group. Yodel number two."

"The point?"

"The point is—I'm here to help you."

"You're here to help *me*."

"I thought I just said that. Is there an—"

"Oh, please."

"Okay, okay. Look. You wanna save the world, right?"

“Not the whole world. Only a little of it. Just a tiny piece will do. I...I just want to write well—really well. Convincingly. Startlingly. I want to horrify and edify. Make people see that real horror is in the way they waste time and life and money and resources and—”

The Smoker raised his hands to stem the rush of words. “Whoa, whoa, *whoa!* Writing well? That’s your answer to the world’s problems: World hunger, political corruption, spiritual decay? Kid, you got a lot to learn. Writing is nothing. Money, now, that’s something.”

“Money?”

“Money, celebrity, status—that’s how you change the world. Just think of it: You got money—you can give it away. You got celebrity—you can be visible. You got status—you can throw it around.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah. Believe me, as a good writer—even a great writer—you’re nowhere. You got zip. You appeal to the so-called intelligentsia and what have you got? A bunch of smug, self-œ’righteous ‘admirers,’ that’s what you got. Know what that is? Zip. They read your books, then sit around on their Bistros agreein’ with your insights and sayin’ how brill you are and how brill they are for recognizing how brill you are. That’s crap. But if you got money, celebrity, status—we-ell, then you put on one of those crummy T-shirts you’re so stiff over and people will notice. You hear what I’m sayin’, Jack? You got to be visible before anything you do or say means a damn.”

“Yeah, so what? I don’t stand a snowball’s chance in Hell of that happening.”

The Smoker scratched his nose. “Funny you should say that, kid, ‘cause, in point of fact, you got a chance.”

“I do?”

“You do.”

Bert nodded. “Sure. Right. And you’re going to give it to me.”

“I am.”

“How?”

The Smoker took a long drag on his illegal cigarette (which seemed not to have gotten any shorter during their conversation) and smiled. “The mechanics are my problem. All

you gotta do is wait. You know what they say: All things come to those who wait."

*"They do, huh?"*

The Smoker scratched his ear. "Yeah. You know, the famous They. Wha'd'ya say, kid?"

"What do you mean—what do I say?"

"To the deal."

"The deal?"

The little guy sighed. "Holy Christmas, kid. You are truly dense. Look. You go home, see. Hang out. Do your own thing—whatever the jargon is these days—and I do the rest."

Bert pursed his entire face. "Fame? Fortune? Status?"

"The works."

He felt a tiny hope springing eternal in his breast. "You mean, I can go home and keep writing what I've been writing and it'll sell? I'll become famous and—"

The gloved hands were up again. "Hold your fire, bwana. Gimme a little help here. You do that and the deal is off. No way even I can do that big a miracle."

Bert scowled, then shook his head. "Wait a minute. What am I thinking? This is crazy. Nobody can do that kind of a miracle except God and up to now He hasn't seen fit."

His companion smiled and nodded, puffing vigorously on his smoke. "And so it devolves upon yours truly."

"Oh? And who are you—the Archangel Gabriel?"

The smile deepened. "Not exactly."

"Oh, oh, wait! I see. You're the Devil, right, and you're offering me all this in return for my immortal soul, right?"

"Your immortal soul is already spoken for, Jack. Besides, I wouldn't know what to do with it if you gave it to me."

Bert gaped. "You expect me to believe you're really the Devil?"

The man spread his arms. "In the flesh."

“Oh, come on!”

“Hey! Who knew what you were thinkin’, here, huh? Who knew all about you?”

“You could’ve seen me around. Or—or someone might have put you up to this. Like my jackass neighbor. That’s it, isn’t it—Jack the Ass sent you! You followed me here—”

“And just happened to overhear all your innermost thoughts?”

Bert was silent.

“You have a birthmark next to your navel. You love Peking Duck, hate pizza, and think Hemingway was overrated. You haven’t had a steady girlfriend since your junior year in college. You’re a virgin. You wanna hear more?”

“I-”

“Oh, yeah—your most embarrassing moment was during high school when your English teacher found this poem—”



“Stop! Stop! Okay. I believe you’re...something... So, where do I sign?”

“You don’t sign. Remember, I’m Satan-the-Devil.” He said it fast, like one of those televangelists, as if it was all one word. “I’ll know if you’ve been living up to your part of the bargain. All that contracts-in-blood stuff was just bad press. A strong verbal and a shake are good enough for me.”

“Okay. How do I know you’re living up to your part of the bargain?”

“Easy. You’ll become rich and famous.”

“Uh-huh.” Bert gave the little man a hard look. “Oh, what the Hell—you’ll pardon the expression. Okay, sure. I’ll bite.” He held out his hand for the guy to take and was embarrassed to realize he expected it to be hot. It wasn’t, of course.

The guy chuckled. “Everybody expects me to burn ‘em. More bad press. You could give me a little help in that department, if you’re so inclined.”

“Oh...sure.”

“Well, nice doin’ business with ya, bwana.” He gave a mocking salute and turned to go.

“Hey, wait a minute. Can I ask you something?”

“Sure.”

“Why do you have a Brooklyn accent?”

“Damned research department. I asked for *Brookline*.” He shook his head and moved off into the dark. “*Putzes*.”

Herbert skipped Writer’s Group that night. He went home and read part of a cyber-shock novel. Then he started to write one. He skipped the Group for the next two months, too, busy working on the novel.

He finished the book and sent it off to an agent he knew was hot into the genre, then missed the next month with the Writer’s Group because he was a little ashamed of what he was doing.

At the end of the month, the agent sent Bert contracts. The novel gave him dry heaves, he said. It was great. Bert started writing short stories. He was too busy to go to any Writer’s meetings and felt it was better to write than to merely talk about writing.

Within two weeks, the agent called and told Bert his novel, NIGHT OF STEEL DEATH, was going up for auction between three major houses. Bert dropped by the *Espress-O* just long enough to tell his old cronies he had a bid war going for one of his books (he neglected to mention the title or genre), then took himself out for dinner.

In the time before the auction, Bert finished four cyber-€’shock stories and mailed them off. The novel sold for a seven-figure advance. The stories went for \$3,000 apiece. Bert quit his job and began his second cyber-shocker, throwing in a twisted version of the love story from OF BLOOD DARK SKIES.

He didn’t see the Writer’s Group again; by now he considered them a bunch of hopelessly self-involved losers. He was surprised to find he didn’t even miss them.

He bought a house in Marblehead, started an investment portfolio and got a girlfriend and a dog. He gave a substantial amount to charity and wore his “Tune It Or Die” T-shirt proudly. He did the workshop circuit, TV talk shows, book tours, Horror fiction conventions. After a few tries, he gave up attempting to weave his philosophy of life into these endeavors and talked shock-€’shop to the delight of his ardent fans. After a while, the philosophy seemed pretty sophomoric. He was visible—that was what really mattered.

His career was long and successful by almost any standards. Only his ex-writing buddies spoke of selling out. He didn't know that, of course, he never saw them.

He was ninety-five when it began to occur to him that his time might soon be running out. He began to expect to look up one day and see the Devil—in more traditional garb—beckoning him through the fiery gates. By his ninety-sixth birthday it had become an obsession. It colored his work, showing up as a fixation on the mortality of all flesh, but that seemed only to increase his popularity. He realized that, at this point in his career, he could say anything he wanted, but found, perversely, that he had very little to say.

One crisp winter evening he took a nostalgic stroll by the crystal waters of the River Charles and waxed retrospective. He had gone through his collection of thick scrapbooks that evening, ensconced in the artfully lit recesses of his “trophy room.” It occurred to him then that, while his reviewers raved about his novels, using words like *terse*, *horrific*, *paralyzing*, *disturbing*, *electrifying*, not one had ever said his work was *thought-provoking* or *illuminating* or even *passionate*.

Still, he was earning millions every year, while the most successful member of his old Writer's Group was pulling down a paltry 90k per annum as a college professor of creative writing and turning out thick, thoughtful science fiction tomes.

He watched the lights from the shoreline promenade cavort among the ripples of the Charles and wondered what life would have been like if he'd kept writing books like *OF BLOOD DARK SKIES*—books with heart and soul and relevance.

“Hell,” said a voice behind him. “It would've been pure hell, kid.”

He spun around as fast as his ninety-six year old body would allow and propped his butt against the parapet. “You.”

It was the Devil, of course—taller, younger, more handsome than before and dressed in this year's latest fashion, but undeniably the same. He was smoking one of the red cigarettes (it could have been the same one, for all Bert knew), but had dropped the Brooklyn accent.

“So,” said Bert, nodding.

“So,” said the Devil.

“So, it's pay-off time.”

“Well, accounting time, anyway.”

“So, this is where I hand over my immortal soul and go to Hell.”

“Nope. I told you, kid, I wouldn’t know what to do with your soul if you gave it to me. And I’ll let you in on a secret—there is no Hell. He made it up to scare the sinners.”

“You don’t want my soul?”

“No.”

“Really?”

“Really.”

“You’re not joking with me?”

The Devil pointed up at his lean, good-looking face. “Does this look like the face of a joker?”

“No.”

“Then, trust me—I’m not joking.”

“But we had a contract—an agreement.”

“We did.”

“Well, when do you collect?”

“I already did, kid. I did what you expected; you did what I expected. Good business, all the way around.”

Bert shook his head. “But I don’t understand. What the hell did I do? I didn’t do *anything*.”

The Devil smiled. His teeth were perfect and even and very white. “Just what you said, kid. Nothing. You didn’t do a damn thing. You wrote uninspired novels that didn’t do anything but scare people. You never wrote anything even remotely important, never challenged yourself, never challenged anyone else. Except for a few handouts—most of which were eaten up by the overhead those charity organizations lug around—you never did a damn thing to better the world around you. Hell, you even turned into a recluse there for a while. That was great. You might as well have gone to Tibet.”

“I did go to Tibet.”

The Devil shrugged. “Well, see. Even *I* lost track of you. In short, bwana, you never set forth one original, inspiring, illumined, or impassioned thought. I couldn’t have asked for better than that. I’ll tell you, kid, I wish I had ten billion more just like you.” He clapped Bert on the shoulder and smiled into his ninety-six year old face. “Nice doing business with you, kid.”

He turned then, and stepped briskly away down the promenade, his patent leather Guccis clicking contentedly against the gleaming lightstone of the walk.

Several yards away, he turned back for a last glance at the stoop-shouldered old man perched, like a stranded albatross, on the parapet. He chuckled, appreciating the scene. “By the way, kid—have a nice forever.”

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