

## Will You Wait?

by Alfred Bester

They keep writing those antiquated stories about bargains with the Devil. You know . . . sulphur, spells and pentagrams; tricks, snares and delusions. They don't know what they're talking about. Twentieth century diabolism is slick and streamlined, like jukeboxes and automatic elevators and television and all the other modern efficiencies that leave you helpless and infuriated.

A year ago I got fired from an agency job for the third time in ten months. I had to face the fact that I was a failure. I was also dead broke. I decided to sell my soul to the Devil, but the problem was how to find him. I went down to the main reference room of the library and read everything on demonology and devillore. Like I said, it was all just talk. Anyway, if I could have afforded the expensive ingredients which they claimed could raise the Devil, I wouldn't have had to deal with him in the first place.

I was stumped, so I did the obvious thing; I called Celebrity Service. A delicate young man answered.

I asked, "Can you tell me where the Devil is?"

"Are you a subscriber to Celebrity Service?"

C "No." .

"Then I can give you no information."

"I can afford to pay a small fee for one item."

"You wish limited service?"

"Yes."

"Who is the celebrity, please?"

"The Devil."

"Who?"

"The Devil. . . Satan, Lucifer, Scratch, Old Nick . . . The Devil."

"One moment, please." In five minutes he was back, extremely annoyed. "Veddy soddy. The Devil is no longer a celebrity."

He hung up. I did the sensible thing and looked through the telephone directory. On a page decorated with ads for Sardi's Restaurant I found Satan, Shaitan, Carnage & Bael, 477 Madison Avenue, Judson 3-1900. I called them. A bright young woman answered.

"SSC&B. Good morning."

“May I speak to Mr. Satan, please?”

“The lines are busy. Will you wait?”

I waited and lost my dime. I wrangled with the operator and lost another dime but got the promise of a refund in postage stamps. I called Satan, Shaitan, Carnage & Bae again.

“SSC&B. Good morning.”

“May I speak to Mr. Satan? And please don’t leave me hanging on the phone. I’m calling from a—”

The switchboard cut me off and buzzed. I waited. The coin-box gave a warning click. At last a line opened.

“Miss Hogan’s office.”

“May I speak to Mr. Satan?”

“Who’s calling?”

“He doesn’t know me. It’s a personal matter.”

“I’m sorry. Mr. Satan is no longer with our organization.”

“Can you tell me where I can find him?”

There was muffled discussion in broad Brooklyn and then Miss Hogan spoke in crisp Secretary:  
“Mr. Satan is now with Beëlzebub, Belial, Devil & Orgy.”

I looked them up in the phone directory. 383 Madison Avenue, Plaza 6-1900. I dialed. The phone rang once and then choked. A metallic voice spoke in sing-song: “The number you are dialing is not a working number. Kindly consult your directory for the correct number. This is a recorded message.” I consulted my directory. It said Plaza 6-1900. I dialed again and got the same recorded message.

I finally broke through to a live operator who was persuaded to give me the new number of Beëlzebub, Belial, Devil & Orgy. I called them. A bright young woman answered.

“B.B.D.O. Good morning.”

“May I speak to Mr. Satan, please?”

“V/ho?”

“Mr. Satan.”

“I’m sorry. There is no such person with our organization.”

“Then give me Beëlzebub or the Devil.”

“One moment, please.”

I waited. Every half minute she opened my wire long enough to gasp: “Still ringing the Dcv—” and then cut off before I had a chance to answer. At last a bright young woman spoke. “Mr. Devil’s office.”

“May I speak to him?”

“Who’s calling?”

I gave her my name.

“He’s on another line. V/ill you wait?”

I waited. I was fortified with a dwindling reserve of nickels and dimes. After twenty minutes, the bright young woman spoke again: “He’s just gone into an emergency meeting. Can he call you back?”

“No. I’ll try again.”

Nine days later I finally got him.

“Yes, sir? V/hat can I do for you?”

I took a breath. “I want to sell you my soul.”

“Have you got anything on paper?”

“What do you mean, anything on paper?”

“The Property, my boy. The Sell. You can’t expect B.B.D.O. to buy a pig in a poke. We may drink out of dixie cups up here, but the sauce has got to be a hundred proof. Bring in your Presentation. My girl’ll set up an appointment.”

I prepared a Presentation of my soul with plenty of Sell. Then I called his girl.

“I’m sorry, he’s on the Coast. Call back in two weeks.” Five weeks later she gave me an appointment. I went up and

sat in the photo-montage reception room of B.B.D.O. for two hours, balancing my Sell on my knees. Finally I was ushered into a corner office decorated with Texas brands in glowing neon. The Devil was lounging on his contour chair, dictating to an Iron Maiden. He was a tall man with the phoney voice of a sales manager; the kind that talks loud in elevators. He gave me a Sincere handshake and immediately looked through my Presentation.

“Not bad,” he said. “Not bad at all. I think we can do business. Now what did you have in mind? The usual?”

“Money, success, happiness.”

He nodded. “The usual. Now we’re square shooters in this shop. B.B.D.O. doesn’t dry-gulch. We’ll guarantee money, success and happiness.”

“For how long?”

“Normal life-span. No tricks, my boy. We take our estimates from the Actuary Tables. Offhand I’d say you’re good for another forty, forty-five years. We can pin-point that in the contract later.”

“No tricks?”

He gestured impatiently. “That’s all bad public relations, what you’re thinking. I promise you, no tricks.”

“Guaranteed?”

“Not only do we guarantee service; we insist on giving service. B.B.D.O. doesn’t want any beefs going up to the Fair Practice Committee. You’ll have to call on us for service at least twice a year or the contract will be terminated.”

“V/hat kind of service?”

He shrugged. “Any kind. Shine your shoes; empty ashtrays; bring you dancing girls. That can be pin-pointed later. We just insist that you use us at least twice a year. We’ve got to give you a quid for your quo “Quid pro quo. Check?”

“But no tricks?”

“No tricks. I’ll have our legal department draw up the contract. Who’s representing you?”

“You mean an agent? I haven’t got one.”

He was startled. “Haven’t got an agent? My boy, you’re living dangerously. Why, we could skin you alive. Get yourself an agent and tell him to call me.”

“Yes, sir. M-May I . . . Could I ask a question?”

“Shoot. Everything is open and above-board at B.B.D.O.”

“What will it be like for me . . . wh-when the contract terminates?”

“You really want to know?”

“Yes.”

“I don’t advise it.”

“I want to know.”

He showed me. It was like a hideous session with a psychoanalyst, in perpetuity . . . an eternal, agonizing self-indictment. It was hell. I was shaken.

“I’d rather have inhuman fiends torturing me,” I said.

He laughed. “They can’t compare to man’s inhumanity to himself. Well. . . changed your mind, or is it

a deal?"

"It's a deal."

We shook hands and he ushered me out. "Don't forget," he warned. "Protect yourself. Get an agent. Get the best."

I signed with Sibyl & Sphinx. That was on March 3. I called S & S on March 15. Mrs. Sphinx said: "Oh yes, there's been a hitch. Miss Sibyl was negotiating with B.B.D.O. for you, but she had to fly to Sheol. I've taken over for her."

I called April 1. Miss Sibyl said: "Oh yes, there's been a slight delay. Mrs. Sphinx had to go to Salem for a try-out. A witchburning. She'll be back next week."

I called April 15. Miss Sibyl's bright young secretary told me that there was some delay getting the contracts typed. It seemed that B.B.D.O. was re-organizing its legal department. On May 1, Sibyl & Sphinx told me that the contracts had arrived and that their legal department was looking them over.

I had to take a menial job in June to keep body and soul together. I worked in the stencil department of a network. At least once a week a script would come in about a bargain with the Devil which was signed, sealed and delivered before the opening corn-

mercial. I used to laugh at them. After four months of negotiation I was still threadbare.

I saw the Devil once, bustling down Park Avenue. He was running for Congress and was very busy being jolly and hearty with the electorate. He addressed every cop and doorman by first name. When I spoke to him he got a little frightened; thinking I was a Communist or worse. He didn't remember me at all.

In July, all negotiations stopped; everybody was away on vacation. In August everybody was overseas for some Black Mass Festival. In September Sibyl & Sphinx called me to their office to sign the contract. It was thirty-seven pages long, and fluttered with pasted-in corrections and additions. There were half a dozen tiny boxes stamped on the margin of every page.

"If you only knew the work that went into this contract," Sibyl & Sphinx told me with satisfaction.

"It's kind of long, isn't it?"

"It's the short contracts that make all the trouble. Initial every box, and sign on the last page. All six copies."

I initialed and signed. When I was finished I didn't feel any different. I'd expected to start tingling with money, success and happiness.

"Is it a deal now?" I asked. "Not until he's signed it."

"I can't hold out much longer."

"We'll send it over by messenger." I waited a week and then called.

"You forgot to initial one of the boxes," they told me.

I went to the office and initialed. After another week I called. "He forgot to initial one of the boxes," they told me that time. On October 1st I received a special delivery parcel. I also received a registered letter. The parcel contained the signed, sealed and delivered contract between me and the Devil. I could at last be rich, successful and happy. The registered letter was from B.B.D.O. and informed me that in view of my failure to comply with Clause 27-A of the contract, it was considered terminated,

and I was due for collection at their convenience. I rushed down to Sibyl & Sphinx.

"What's Clause 27-A?" they asked.

We looked it up. It was the clause that required me to use the services of the Devil at least once every six months.

"What's the date of the contract?" Sibyl & Sphinx asked.

We looked it up. The contract was dated March 1st, the day I'd had my first talk with the Devil in his office.

"March, April, May . . ." Miss Sibyl counted on her fingers. "That's right. Seven months have elapsed. Are you sure you didn't ask for any service?"

"How could I? I didn't have a contract."

"We'll see about this," Mrs. Sphinx said grimly. She called B.B.D.O. and had a spirited argument with the Devil and his legal department. Then she hung up. "He says you shook hands on the deal March 1st," she reported. "He was prepared in good faith to go ahead with his side of the bargain."

"How could I know? I didn't have a contract."

"Didn't you ask for anything?"

"No. I was waiting for the contract."

Sibyl & Sphinx called in their legal department and presented the case.

"You'll have to arbitrate," the legal department said, and explained that agents are forbidden to act as their client's attorney.

I hired the legal firm of Wizard, Warlock, Voodoo, Dowser & Hag (99 Watt Street, Exchange 3-1900) to represent me before the Arbitration Board (479 Madison Avenue, Lexington 5-1900). They asked for a \$200 retainer plus twenty percent of the contract's benefits. I'd managed to save \$34 during the four months I was working in the stencil department. They waived the retainer and went ahead with the Arbitration preliminaries.

On November 15 the network demoted me to the mail room, and I seriously contemplated suicide. Only the fact that my soul was in jeopardy in an arbitration stopped me.

The case came up December 12th. It was tried before a panel of three impartial Arbitrators and took all day. I was told they'd

mail me their decision. I waited a week and called Wizard, Warlock, Voodoo, Dowser & Hag.

“They’ve recessed for the Christmas holidays,” they told me. I called January 2.

“One of them’s out of town.” I called January 10.

“He’s back, but the other two are out of town.”

“When will I get a decision?” “It could take months.”

“How do you think my chances look?”

“Well, we’ve never lost an arbitration.” “That sounds pretty good.”

“But there can always be a first time.”

That sounded pretty bad. I got scared and figured I’d better copper my bets. I did the sensible thing and hunted through the telephone directory until I found Seraphim, Cherubim and Angel, 666 Fifth Avenue, Templeton 6-1900. I called them. A bright young woman answered.

“Seraphim, Cherubim and Angel. Good morning.”

“May I speak to Mr. Angel, please?”

“He’s on another line. Will you wait?”

I’m still waiting.