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Albert and the Daemon

by MARSH HARIS

Not dutifully, but because he had no choice, Albert Spangler joined the general crush hour traffic of the city in which he lived and pretended to be oblivious to the miasma about him. Within the half-hour, he descended from the thick atmosphere of the bus and took the elevator to the eighteenth floor of the new building in which he lived, entering once again the quiet, dimly lit, airconditioned world of his tastefully furnished bachelor apartment. But it wasn't until after getting out of his tight white collar and his grey flannel suit that he felt he had really escaped. As a final assertion of his temporary freedom, Albert Spangler fixed himself a drink and allowed the first cooling sip to trickle down his throat and do with his internal workings as it saw fit.

As it had been Friday and payday, he had stopped off at a music shop and purchased a record, a weekly habit of his that after a number of years had resulted in no ordinary collection of discs. Drink in hand, he moved over to the phonograph, deciding that this indeed was the perfect time to give it a hearing.

He paused momentarily before placing the newly purchased disc on the turntable. The Hölle label; apparently a new entry on the market. And then he noticed a strange thing. Whereas he had intended buying a much praised recording of Schubert's Grand Duo for Two Pianos, Opus 140, he found that the disc he held in his hand showed no title at all. Having no idea how such a thing could have happened, he stood for a moment wondering just what exactly he had bought, then hastily placed it on the machine.

By the time sound came through the speakers, Albert was seated comfortably on the other side of the room, lifting the cool glass to his lips.

«Good evening, Albert,» the speakers said in a reedy, matter-of-fact man's voice.

Albert Spangler shot up and looked curiously about the room. The phonograph had distinctly spoken to him.

«Yes, yes, I know, you're startled to hear your own name coming off the phonograph where there should be Schubert. 'Should be Schubert;' that's rather clever, don't you think.»

«What the hell's going on here?» Albert said out loud, not really meaning to address the phonograph.

«Well if you'll try to contain yourself I'll see what I can do in the way of explanation.»

«I'd rather you see what you can do in the way of shutting up. I prefer it ten to one.»

«Nonsense, old boy. The least you could do is be polite.»

«Well part of being polite is not talking back, and I'll be damned if I'm going to sit here and talk back to a phonograph.»

«Perhaps you'd feel better if I introduced myself. I'm called Bakla.»

«Bakla what?»

«Just Bakla. I don't need another name because there's no one else like me. One of a kind, so to speak.»

«I devoutly hope so. Even one is too many. Much as I dislike encouraging you to go on, maybe you'd explain to me what you happen to be doing on my record player, other than irritating the hell out of me. I was counting on Schubert, as if you didn't know.»

«Yes, well I was just getting to that. Albert, I have a gift for you . . . a proposition, actually.»

«Look, if this is some clever sales trick, I'm not interested.»

«Perish the thought forever.»

«Well then who are you?»

«Not 'who,' old boy, 'what?' You see, I'm what you'd call a daemon.»

«I certainly would, and maybe worse. As soon as I finish this drink I'm going to chuck you in the garbage can and demand my money back from that foolish music shop.»

«No, no, I'm serious. I, Bakla, am a genuine, thoroughbred daemon.»

«Don't be such a braggart. I don't care if you're a lowly imp. Personally I think you're just an old phonograph record with bad manners.»

«It so happens that you've succeeded in making contact; you've communicated with the Underworld . . . my world. Congratulations.»

«I'm not impressed. And it was you who contacted me; I had nothing to do with it. Now why don't you go away. The phonograph is automatic; why don't you just turn yourself off?»

«Nonsense, old boy; you called me and I'm duty bound to negotiate with you. Here, let me refresh your memory. Last night, if you'll think back, as you lay in bed, alone and lamenting the fact vehemently, you said to yourself, 'This is ridiculous. I'd just as well be in hell for all the fun I'm having. I'd take *anything* about now!' Remember?»

«All right, so I did say something like that. You would too if you hadn't grabbed off any fun in months. But what do you expect me to do, seduce a phonograph record? Oh a '45-RPM', maybe, but a '33-1/3', never!»

«Really now, Albert, what do you take me for some kind of pervert?»

«Why not? I wouldn't put anything past a smart-mouthing phonograph record.»

«I'll forget that remark for the time being. Now would you mind turning me over?»

«I beg your pardon?»

«I said I'd like to be turned over. We perverted phonograph records are funny that way.»

«I figured as much,» Albert flung back, then got up and complied efficiently with Bakla's request, as though it were the most natural thing to be doing.

«Thanks loads, old boy,» the disc continued. «Now shall we get down to business?»

«If it's all the same to you, I still prefer Schubert.»

«Pity, old trop, but you see, I can't return without accomplishing my mission.»

«You'll forgive me, 'old fiend,» Albert said sarcastically, «but you haven't really explained what your mission is. And what's more, I hope you don't.»

«Now Albert, you're biting the hand that feeds you. I've simply come to fulfill your wish, that's all.»

«Why? What's in it for you?»

«Oh . . . a little something. But don't worry, it won't affect you.»

«Pardon the hell out of me, Charlie, while I laugh myself silly. Listen, I know your kind; I've read Lovecraft and all the others and they taught me one thing: Never make a deal with the devil.»

«Oh my goodness!» Bakla laughed. «Albert, I'm afraid you're far from deserving a visit from him! Mercy, I'm just an ordinary daemon. I mean, if you need a lawyer, you can't expect the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court to represent you. Besides, that Lovecraft chap had it all wrong. We're nowhere near the nasty little imps he made us out to be. Oh perhaps in the really Good Old Days, yes . . . but that was aeons before Lovecraft's day. We've had to keep up with the times like everything else. Look at me, whirling around like some crazed dervish on this foolish machine, when all the time I should be crouched ominously in the corner, grunting evilly with saliva dripping from my diseased teeth. Matter of fact, I feel a trifle wronged. I think you should apologise.»

«What! Oh you can go to hell!»

«But I've just barely come from there, old boy. Now I do wish you'd try to be a little nicer about all this. What I'm trying to tell you is that you're a very lucky man. Here I am doing my best to fulfill your fondest wish and you're being huffy.»

«All right,» Albert said a little impatiently. «Just what is it you want to do for me, like the benevolent little daemon you claim to be?»

«The most glorious word in your world or mine, Albert: Sex. I've come to see to it that you get your fill.»

«Fine, to that I'm not complaining. When do I start?»

«Any time, actually. But I'm afraid you're going to have to be specific or I can't help you. In other words, what exactly is it you'd like? Describe it.»

«What! Oh no! I mean if you think I'm going to sit here and blab to a phonograph and an empty room just what sort of hanky panky I prefer you're wrong.»

«Oh dammit all, Albert! I told you I can't leave until I've fulfilled my mission, and I can't fulfill my mission without your telling me what you want! Now, come, come, out with it.»

Albert of the neglected lovelife pondered this unusual turn of events for a moment. He absolutely could not bring himself to confess to a total stranger, whether he be a phonograph record or more in the line of flesh and blood, that what he actually wanted was another man. And yet on the other hand, what if he said he'd like a woman and Bakla produced one? It was an unhinging thought. Quickly, he harked back to the many stories he'd read about deals with the devil and suddenly realised how matters of this sort had to be handled. Such creatures as Bakla were like legal contracts, they stated their propositions literally. Albert then would resort to the same thing. After all, nothing had been said about whether or not he was obliged to accept what Bakla produced.

«Very well,» Albert said calmly, «I'd like a tall, blond broad of awesome measurements, sultry blue eyes . . .»

«Albert, you're lying.»

«I'm not.»

«You are.»

«I'm not.»

«You are, you are, you are! Do you think I didn't research you a bit before coming all that distance? Now . . . what sort of man would you like him to be?»

«Oh . . . then you know.»

«Really, Albert, why do you suppose they sent *me*? It takes all kinds, as you humans say.»

«Well I'll be damned!»

«Most likely, but it won't be at all what you expect. Now shall we proceed?»

«Make him . . . well, let's simplify it: Tall, dark, handsome, and intelligent. Okay?»

«Splendid! Now if you'll excuse me, I'm going to be very busy for a moment or two.»

All at once there was a strange tingling sensation in the room as the drapery began to move restlessly and the ice tinkled in Albert's glass. Then, after a moment had passed, there suddenly appeared a small puff of green smoke in the corner of the room. When the pale effluvium had drifted to the ceiling there was revealed standing behind a wing chair a tall, dark, handsome man, with an intelligent twinkle in his eye.

«Godamighty!» Albert stammered.

«Do you mind?» the man said suavely, glancing in the direction of the phonograph. «Your record seems to have ended.»

«Yea,» Albert mumbled, slackjawed. Still gazing in disbelief at the beautiful man over by the chair, he got up slowly and turned off the machine. «But your voice . . . it's Bakla's voice.»

«Well what did you expect, a total stranger? That would hardly be proper . . . considering what's going to happen.»

«Hap . . . happen? Uh . . . what *is* going to happen? Oh my lord, why did I ask that?»

Bakla's face split into a wildly passionate grin. «Why, I'm simply going to seduce you, that's all.»

And Albert believed it. «From the look on your face you're going to enjoy it too, aren't you.»

«To the hilt, as it were. But then so will you. I just happen to have the ability to make it perfect, you see, something few mortals ever experience.»

«Uh, tell me something,» Albert said unsteadily. «Weren't you supposed to come equipped with clothes? You seem to be . . . naked, a veritable jaybird.»

«I'm glad you noticed. Frankly, I saw no reason to wear clothes. Saves time.»

«Well at least you have the discretion to stand behind the chair.»

«Yes, well that's mere coincidence, I assure you. This is just where I happened to pop up, that's all. Care to see the rest of me?»

«Wait! I'm not altogether sure I'm ready for it yet.»

«Why Albert, that sounds almost obscene. Of course I intend doing everything possible to make you 'ready for it,' as you put it.»

«Please, I didn't mean it that way. It's just that the top half of you is the most magnificent thing I've ever seen. If the bottom half is commensurate, the very sight could bring on an epileptic seizure, or something.»

«It's that 'or something' you're going to have to watch out for. Now ready or not, here I come.»

Of a truth, Albert could hardly have been less ready. What happened next caused him to shriek hysterically and pull his entire body, legs and all, onto the couch. Bakla swaggered gracefully from behind the chair and stood in the very centre of the room. The bottom half, unfortunately, was nowhere near commensurate with the top. He was all glorious man in every respect save for his feet and legs. These two appendages, however, had missed out roundly. Oh they were sturdy, very shapely, and boasting considerable hirsute

growth. Indeed, they had everything to recommend them save for one factor: They were goats' legs.

«Bakla, you have goats' legs!»

«Please, Albert. We prefer to think that goats have daemons' legs. Anyway it comes to the same thing.»

«Not with me it doesn't! I'm not bundling up with any goat!»

«But what about the rest of me?»

«Infinitely bundleable to say the very least. Hoo-boy! But God what a good pair of legs would do for you.»

«That's one reason I'm here. You see, all daemons have legs like mine, and all daemons want legs like yours . . . assuming of course you have decent legs. Now there is one way, and only one, that we can acquire human legs.»

«What's that, I should ask?»

«Have sex with a human.»

«Oh lord. Why couldn't you have been an incubus and raped me in my sleep?»

«The idea has merit, but that sort of falderal isn't allowed anymore. They cracked down on us.»

»I wish someone would crack down on you right now. Couldn't you go back behind the chair while my nerves catch their breath a minute?»

«No, we're going to bed; come on.»

«Touch me and I'll scream.»

«Good, I like it more that way.»

«Will you please not say things like that! Look, are you for real, or just some grizzly fata morgana that's about to drive me flaky?»

«Oh for real, of course. Heavens, you couldn't flop about with just a lot of ectoplasm.»

«Off hand, I'd prefer it to flopping about with that protoplasm of yours, bottom half-wise.»

«Now Albert, old boy, be sensible. After the first time, I'll *have* human legs! Then . . . well use your imagination.»

«So who needs imagination at a time like this!»

«Precisely; now come on.» He reached out suddenly and grabbed Albert by the wrist, guiding him forcefully to the bedroom.

«Who'd have thought,» the abducted man mumbled to himself, «that at the age of thirty-two I'd be raped by a daemon who is half man und half goat?»

«Probably no one,» Bakla admitted, then turned off the light.

After the passing of a hectic and altogether unique half-hour, Bakla rose and turned on the light. Albert, barely able to focus after such an ordeal, squinted up at the extraordinary creature standing over him. What he saw made him rise on his elbows and put his ocular and other assorted nerves to the supreme test. There before him was the torso of an unbelievably desirable man, floating in mid air with no visible support whatever.

«Oh no,» Albert moaned. «Bring them back. I'm sorry I insulted them.»

«Bring what back? Insulted what?»

«Your goat legs. Bad as they were, they were better than nothing. Did you have to toss them out completely?»

Bakla looked down and studied himself. Or half of himself, as it were. Nor did the sight of this new trick help matters for Albert. He fell back on the bed and closed his eyes, with little intention of ever opening them again.

«Oh, that's the most horrid thing I've ever seen. Bakla, couldn't you manage at least some kind of stilts? Anything would be an improvement.»

«Don't worry, my passionate one, they're just in transit. In a couple of minutes now I'll have a pair of gams like unto Hercules himself.»

«And I'll have a nervous system like unto the fringe of an old mantilla.»

«Look,» Bakla said excitedly. «Look what's happening!»

«Not me,» Albert assured him. «I'm too busy having a nervous collapse. What're you doing, sprouting fliggers, or maybe chicken legs?»

«I'm telling you, this is too good to miss. Try peeking at me through a couple of fingers.»

«All right, but you're the one who's going to clean up the mess.» Hesitantly, Albert opened an eye to half-mast and sampled what was taking place before him. The first impression was a Hollywood camera trick. Legs, superb legs, were gradually materializing from the groin down. «Damnedest thing I ever saw. Do they know when to stop?»

«A leg's a leg, old boy. After that there's no place else to go.» Just then the knee came into view.

«No doubt about it, Bakla, they're gorgeous, but if you don't hurry up and reach the floor my senses are going to be permanently damaged. Puts me in mind of an old song about one bone being connected to another. Never knew how awful that song was.»

«Hold on, I'm working on the feet now. There!» He stepped back a trifle and flexed his new limbs proudly. «So how do I look, you old mortal?» Albert lifted a groggy head and rubbed his eyes. 'Damnedest dream I ever had,' he said to himself, then reached over to turn off the alarm that was yet to

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When the sun broke through his bedroom windows the following morning, Albert lifted a groggy head and rubbed his eyes. 'Damnedest dream I ever had,' he said to himself, then reached over to turn off the alarm that was yet to sound.

«Don't bother, old lover, I turned it off myself.»

«Yaaaa! I thought you were a dream!»

«You weren't so bad yourself, you old rake.»

«You mean it really happened?»

«Oh a number of times.»

«God, what a depraved mind you have. But I thought you had to go to hell.»

«'Fraid you're right on that point.»

«How do you do it, back through the green smoke again?»

«Ostensibly yes, but it's also a matter of that phonograph record. I actually return through it.»

«Sonofagun. But suppose something happened to it.»

«Then I'd be trapped here, that's all. But it's not likely. You see, we daemons all want to get back on Earth and stay here, so when we're sent on missions they make certain we have no way of 'fouling up our transportation,' so to speak.»

«You mean it's sort of a magic record and no one can destroy it?»

«No, no, no. I simply mean that *I* can't. Why, an ordinary mortal could break it into a thousand pieces.»

«Well . . . better get up and fix breakfast. What would you like?»

«Never touch the stuff. Don't function like ordinary human beings, you know. Not in all respects, that is.»

«Apparently your hands do though. Do you know what they're doing right now?»

«Yes, I put them up to it, and the rest of me approves entirely. Say, about that record...»

«Like I said, a little breakfast seems to be in order. At least for me.»

«May I come along and watch?»

«Yes, if you promise to wear a bathrobe. I could never fry sausages with you standing there in the altogether.»

«By the way, I have a deadline,» Bakla said as they moved into the kitchen. «I have to be out of here by noon. But if you took that record, see, and...»

«You sure you don't at least have an occasional cup of coffee?»

«Positive. Now as I was saying...»

«Too bad about that deadline. But at least it's Saturday and I can be here to see you off.»

«But Al, old love, you wouldn't have to if...»

«Can't see how you get along without at least one cup of coffee in the morning.»

«It's not coffee I want, and I could make such a pun...! Couldn't we go back to bed after you've eaten?»

Albert grinned at him, then bit into a piece of toast.

At a quarter to twelve, Bakla heaved his muscular thighs from the bed and looked sadly at the reclining Albert. «It's time,» he said. «Albert, it's been the most wonderful thing I've ever done. I don't... want to leave. Couldn't you take that record and...?»

«Come on,» Albert said, taking his hand. «Let's have a last drink together, a farewell toast.»

«I told you I don't drink... or eat. Albert, won't you listen to me? All you have to do is...»

«Then I'll toast you... as you go out in a puff of green smoke. Isn't that romantic.»

«Romance be damned; I'm going home!» He stalked out into the living room. «But I'll need your help a bit. No doubt you'll enjoy putting on the phonograph for me so I can leave.»

Albert finished pouring himself a drink and came over to the machine. He reached down and removed the disc from the turntable, examining it carefully. «Which side am I to play?»

«Albert, you'll have to hurry. You see, if I'm late they'll take away my new legs and I'll never again have a chance to get more. Please, there's only a minute left.»

«Yes, but which side do I play?»

«Side one; it's clearly marked.»

«That's strange, I don't see it.»

«Albert, please! Seconds are ticking away!»

Albert came across the room toward him. «Really, Bakla, I can't seem to tell which side is which.»

«This one, this one!» Bakla screamed frantically, turning the record over in Albert's hand. «Now hurry!»

Just then the clock in the dining room began to strike noon. Albert quickened his pace just a trifle.

On the tenth stroke Albert seemed to make a final effort by lunging at the machine. Suddenly one arm went one way, a leg the other, and the two remaining limbs split the difference. The result was Albert, his drink, and the record on the floor.

The dining room clock stood silent.

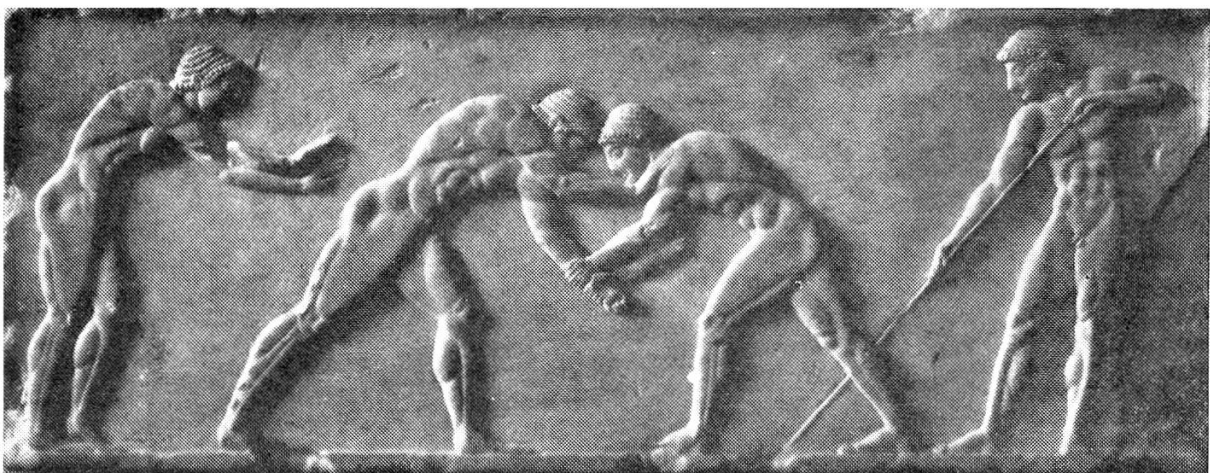
In the far corner of the room Bakla stood with tears dropping slowly over the rims of his eyes. He reached down and touched his legs, waiting for them to begin disappearing.

«How clumsy of me,» Albert said, sitting in the middle of the floor. A broad grin began to inch its way across his face, his eyes sparkling mischievously as he surveyed the array of tiny broken pieces that encircled him.

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