



'As he concentrated on his work he seemed to hear a strange, distant laughter . . .

The DEVIL FINDS WORK

By Mack Reynolds

Making a pact with the devil can have certain advantages — especially if payment is not exacted. But who works for nothing?



"**N**O," THE poet replied, after considering briefly. "To tell you the truth, I never really believed I had one, nor that anyone else had for that matter, but now I am aware I have a soul I most certainly have no desire to sell it."

"Oh, come now," said Mephistopheles, ingratiatingly. "If you've been perfectly happy in the past without even knowing of this er... property, why should you be so loathe to part with it? —At a good price, of course." He drew on his Pittsburgh stogie with satisfaction, thinking he'd made a devilish good point.

The poet shook his head stubbornly. "If a soul wasn't of considerable value, you wouldn't want to buy it. And, not to change the subject, who said I've been happy in the past?"

His face took on an esthetic expression which the demon found more than ordinarily nauseating.

"There," Mephistopheles exclaimed, "you admit it yourself! Your life has been less than satisfactory thus far. Come, let us not descend to common haggling; I said I'd give you ten years of whatsoever your heart desires. We'll make it twenty."

The poet ran a limpid hand through his long blond hair and hedged. "Just what do you mean by 'my heart's desire'?"

The tip of the demon's stogie burned red, he knew, being infernally clever, that he now had the other in the bag. "Just that," he said easily. "What do you wish most of life?"

The poet's eyes took on a far away glaze. "I want my verse to be on everyone's lips, my lyrics heard by all ears..."

"Exactly," said Mephistopheles. "With my assistance it shall be done!" To tell the truth, he was beginning to wonder if he actually wanted this jerk hanging around the nether regions for

the rest of eternity; the place was getting rather crowded, business being so good these days that it was seldom any more that he resorted to this sort of deal. However, there was another factor involved and one that he hoped would bring him considerable renown in the best stygian circles.

The poet considered further, then said slowly, "If I accepted your assistance, it wouldn't be *my* work that became famed, it would be *ours* and I'm not particularly prone to collaborate with the devil."

The demon puffed irritably on the stogie. "Nonsense," he snapped. "Do you think I'd be bothered with writing verse?" The only kind of poetry that ever really appeals to me is a certain type of limerick." His dark countenance lightened a bit. "Listen," he continued, irreverently, "did you hear the one that starts, '*There was a young man from Kent*'?"

The poet placed his hands over his ears. "Please," he murmured delicately.

"Oh, very well," said Mephistopheles, miffed, "but I'm particularly interested in sponsoring your career. You write the verse; I'll see it reaches the public, and at a goodly profit to yourself."

THE POET made a move. "But if my poetry has the seeds of greatness; what need have I of your services?" He gestured sweepingly, albeit gracefully, at the garret studio in which they were holding their conversation. "I won't remain here long if my name once..."

The demon snorted. "Twattle! Just because a man is potentially a great poet doesn't mean his verse will ever be written, or, even if it is, that it will be received with the acclaim to which it is entitled."

"I...I don't believe I follow you." Mephistopheles flicked a hand

impatiently. "Take your outstanding poets of the Romantic Period—Byron, Shelley, Keats. All three had the er...breaks; none of them ever had to worry about their livelihood. Byron was *Lord Byron*, born with a silver spoon in his mouth; Shelley was a baron; Keats came from a fairly well to do family." The demon took a deep drag on the stogie—his last—noting sadly that it was getting rather short. He hated to think of going back to Pittsburgh for another supply. What a place!

He went on. "How many potentially great poets do you think lived their lives out working in the textile mills of Manchester, while Shelley, Byron and Keats had the leisure and wealth to spend their time spinning rhymes?" He warmed to his subject. "Take Thomas Hood, for example; poverty stricken all his life, he had to expend his energies writing cheap puns in verse form for the London papers. Had he been given the leisure and security of the others, you might be celebrating another name today as the shining light of the Romantic Period."

"Hmmm," the poet said, "it has truthfully been written that the devil is eloquent." He thought it over. "These surroundings are somewhat depressing. You really think you could make my work as well known as Shelley's; as Byron's?"

The demon pressed his point. "Even more so! I shall act as your agent, bring your work to the attention of the right persons, direct your efforts; see that they are financially remunerative." He gestured dramatically with the hand that held the now cold stogie. "The whole nation will hear your lyrics!"

The poet was swept away. His voice rang passionately, "I'll do it!"

Mephistopheles beamed and became instantly businesslike. "By a remark-

able coincidence," he said, "I have a contract right here in my pocket. If you'll just sign on the line at the bottom where I've marked the 'X.'" He brought out a fountain pen, touched it to the other's arm and instantly its transparent barrel was filled with dark red. At the poet's gasp, he said soothingly, but briskly, "Blood, you know—all part of the approved procedure."

The poet shivered delicately. "I loathe business," he said, taking the pen. "So crude really."

"Isn't it though?" said the demon, beaming and rubbing his hands together with satisfaction.

TWENTY years had passed and the poet sat at his ease in his Manhattan penthouse, a breather glass of rare Metaxa in his left hand, a pad before him on which he occasionally jotted down a line or two between sips and sniffs of the Greek brandy. An invisible phonograph was playing De Falla's *Nights In the Gardens of Spain* so softly you had to listen with care to make it out. On the walls were several Van Goghs; the poet had become weary of the Gauguins the week before and had had them removed.

A butler in livery entered unobtrusively, and the poet looked up in irritation. "Yes, Granville?" he sighed. "Must these interruptions be endless?"

"I beg your pardon, sir," Granville said, "but your business manager, Mr. Nicholas Mephisto, is here."

The poet ran a limpid hand through his now graying locks. "Oh, I'll receive him, I suppose. I simply loathe business."

Nick Mephisto bustled in, a briefcase in one hand, the other outthrust to be shaken. "You've done it again, old man!" he burped enthusiastically around the stogie clutched in his teeth. He breathed out a gust of the wrath

of Pittsburgh, setting the poet to coughing.

"A smash hit with J. B.," the business manager went on, "he's really nuts-about it."

The poet shook the outstretched hand limply. "He is?" he shrugged. "I supposed he would be. It was brilliantly conceived, of course."

"I'll say," Nick crowed, transported. "In a month, every man, woman and child in the country will be hearing it a dozen times a day." He lifted his eyes to the ceiling ecstatically and recited:

*Colossal Corn, Colossal Corn,
Pop and eat Colossal Cornnnnnn.
At home, at parties, movies too,
Colossal Corn is good for Youuuu!*

He gave a deep sigh of satisfaction. "It'll be your greatest triumph since you wrote the lyrics to *The Music Goes Up and Down*."

"Oh, come now," the poet said deprecatingly.

Nick gestured with enthusiasm. "I really mean it. Old J. B. is going to have it on every network in the country, twenty times a day. He's trying to get Bing, Frankie, Perry, Dinah—" Nick rubbed his hands together with satisfaction.

He took the stogie from his mouth and pointed it at the poet, emphatically. "I thought we were going places when I had you do the lyrics to *Three Little Whalesies, Cowsie Hay and Calvies Milk*, and *The Music Goes Up and Down*, and, to tell you the truth, I got a lot of favorable comment from the home office as a result of them. But these singing commericals, brother..."

The poet took a gentle sip of the Metaxa and frowned lightly. "Ah... Nick," he murmured, "there was one thing I wanted to ask you about. That, er...contract we signed some

time ago. It seems to me..."

His business manager held up a hand, hastily. "Now don't you worry about that, old man. As a matter of fact I was talking it over with the boys higher up just the other day and they figured it would be best if we just extended that contract—indefinitely."

The poet gave a gentle sigh of relief and inhaled deeply the bouquet

of the ancient brandy. "I don't believe I quite understand," he sighed. "Of course, I'm quite satisfied, but..."

Nick removed his stogie from his lips and looked at the tip of it with satisfaction. "Very simple, old man; they figured more good is being done the cause by your remaining here and keeping up the fine work."

THE END
