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# *When the Devil Took the Professor*

by KURD LASSWITZ

*translated by Willy Ley*

"BUT CERTAINLY HE TOOK ME," said the Professor, looking lovingly at the white ash of his enormous Havana. "He did. Literally and in person."

"I've seen that coming for years," laughed the Fat Man.

"Who did and what?" asked the Lady in Blue.

"Didn't you pay any attention?" Little Mrs. Broesen was quite impatient. "The devil took the professor."

"But there he sits," the Lady in Blue insisted.

"That's because he took him alive and couldn't digest him," the Fat Man explained.

"I still don't understand."

"Please tell us, Herr Professor."

"Well," (the Professor took a puff first) "it was on Saturday last week. I was sitting at my desk in the evening hours, as usual. Somebody knocked at the door and I called 'come in'; but please don't be frightened now . . ."

"I don't want to hear anything awful," said the Lady in Blue, clapping her hands to her ears, but not too tightly.

"Well, it *was* awful and I was not a little startled at first. Suddenly somebody was standing in the middle of the room, right under the ceiling lights, and I could see him clearly."

"Did he have fiery eyes? Was he clad in a red greatcoat?"

"No, ordinary clothing, with gold-rimmed spectacles and graying hair. Almost *gemütlich*-looking, but the terrible thing was . . ."

"The goat's leg? The forked tail?"

"No, he looked precisely the way I do. Of course, I thought of hallucinations and kept quiet. Then my doppelgänger said: 'I am truly sorry, Herr Professor, but you must come with me. I have decided.' — 'What do you mean, I have to come with you?' I said. 'I'm not a medical man if that's what you think and I am also quite busy.' 'I know who and what you are, and you do have to come with me. I'm the devil.'"

"I must have been prettily taken aback," continued the Professor, "and I said, 'You the devil? But you look like me!' — 'You'll have to pardon that,' the devil told me. 'When I come to take you I have to have this, your, appearance. Everybody is his own devil. But now quit stalling and come along.' — 'Where to?' I asked. 'I'll have you know that I don't believe either in Hell or in the devil in the customary meanings of those words.' — 'You don't have to; I take everybody in the manner in which *he* pictures his world. You, for example, will join me on a nice long trip into space. I know you love to travel to the stars.' — 'Yes, but only figuratively; right here at my desk. Nor do I feel like taking a trip right now. Besides I would have to pack my things first.' — 'Not necessary; after all, trips in my company are not supposed to be pleasure cruises. For you the trip will be a hundred thousand million million kilometers long, or  $10^{17}$  kilometers, if you like that better. I consider this the proper figure for you.' — 'And afterwards?' — 'Afterwards we'll see. Maybe I will make you into a nice meteorite or marry you to a Martian female for a thousand years — *Martian* years!'

"Well, I told him that I would not go and that I had several pieces of research to finish up. He became insistent and I finally said that even if he took me I'd continue to exist in the Earth Soul. Then the devil grew angry; obviously he did not like theoretical discussions. 'I'll take that Earth Soul too one day,' he said."

"The Earth Soul? What's that?" the Lady in Blue interrupted the Professor.

"Please don't interrupt!" said Mrs. Broesen. "The Professor lectured on that theme only a month ago."

"I couldn't come that night. My maid . . ."

"All right, look it up in Fechner's works," said the Fat Man. The Quiet Young Man who had not said anything so far opened his mouth, but then closed it again.

"I was trying to stall some more," the Professor said, "but all of a sudden I found myself in a soft double seat, right next to the devil. My feet were on a foot rest and there was a kind of handrail to hold on to. But otherwise we were freely suspended in space. I decided that I would not let the devil impress me in any way. I felt certain that he had weak points and I have always maintained that Dr. Faustus, if only he had been a better mathematician, could have won his particular case without trouble. 'Well, Professor,' the devil said, 'how do you like my little spaceship? Made in one piece of the ideal material you once thought up, completely transparent and of infinite structural strength. You'll have a beautiful view.'

"I looked around. Behind us there was night, absolute blackness. Above and below, to the right and to the left, there were a number of stars which



became more and more densely packed in front. Directly ahead they coalesced into a bright glow. I did not understand that phenomenon. Precisely where were we? I came to the conclusion that I had been unconscious for some time and asked for how long we had been travelling. The devil told me that it had been for about half an hour and, as I had suspected, that he had had to make me unconscious to get me out of my study and into this vehicle. 'You have never seen a sight like that, have you?' he said maliciously. 'Oh,' I replied, 'I'm quite sure that this can be explained. Just tell me at what speed we are traveling.' 'Just about ten times the speed of light,' he answered."

"Hohoho," the Fat Man shook with laughter. "Ten times the speed of light! It would need the devil to do that."

"It did," the Professor said matter-of-factly. "I quickly thought this over. At ten times the speed of light we must have traversed an astronomical unit in about 50 seconds. The distance to Neptune is in round figures 30 astronomical units. I remarked that we had to be quite some distance from the solar system as a whole under these circumstances and the devil agreed. Then I understood why there was this black night at our back. Since we moved so much faster than the light waves they could not catch up with us and it was dark. The light rays from the sides were intercepted and we could see them. But the bright glow ahead? Because we moved so fast in the opposite direction to the rays meeting us, even the longest visible rays, those of red light, had to be shortened so much that they were shorter by far than ultraviolet. They should not be visible at all. It should have been totally dark in front too, if for a different reason."

"The devil, of course, read my thoughts, or so it seemed because he looked at me, grinned, and said, 'Well, my dear Professor, that glow ahead is something you don't seem to be able to understand.' It was just at that moment that I did understand and I said, 'This is elementary. What is visible ahead is not light as we usually see it. These are rays which are normally far too long to be visible to the human eye. They must be either long heat rays or more likely electric waves which are sufficiently foreshortened by our speed so that my eye accepts them as visible radiation. This is a beautiful proof that the stars emit many long-wave rays which we have never been able to detect directly.'

"The devil grumbled; he was angry that I had been right. But then he crinkled his nose and pulled his mouth wide, just as I do when I ask a difficult question of one of my students — it was awful how much he looked like me — and said, 'If this light inconveniences you, my dear Professor, I can stop it. I have here a screen which is impervious to radiation of any wavelength. See, I turn it around, like this; now no radiation coming from

the front can strike your eyes — but look, there is still some light.' — 'Much weaker now,' I replied. 'Yes,' said the devil. 'Much weaker indeed, but where does it come from? Tell me that.'

"I was taken aback. Was the devil cheating? Did his screen permit a certain wavelength to pass? No, in that case the picture should have been similar to the first, if much weaker. But the distribution of the stars was entirely different and the bright central glow had completely disappeared. The light could not come from the stars ahead. Or was this a mirror? I turned around; no, it was still dark behind us. The devil grinned and I grew almost frantic. I could not permit him to win out in a theoretical debate. Only the Lord knew what rights he would acquire if he could best me. The light could only come from behind even though we were traveling faster than light by far.

" 'Well, my dear Herr Professor?' the devil prompted me with nasty joviality. 'Of course I can explain that,' I said. 'These are light rays which we are overtaking — that's why they appear to come from the front. But since our own movement will increase the wavelength as far as we are concerned, these are again rays which are normally invisible. Only this time they are the very short rays, like ultraviolet. Of course they were there even before you turned your screen but were not discernible because of the stronger glow from the front.' The devil did not like it. 'Any conclusions from this observation?' he said.

" 'Yes', I said. 'If we did not move quite so fast and if I had an instrument with which to observe the earth I would see events running backwards.' The devil made a motion. 'All right; I have reduced the speed, and while you could not build such an instrument it's really simple for me. Here it is.' He handed me something like a small telescope and I could see our street, even read the number of the house. But it was hard to understand what I saw because things did seem to happen backwards. I finally solved my problem by closing my eyes and opening them only for short instants at regular intervals. That way I got a sequence of still pictures which I could easily arrange in proper sequence in my mind.

"I was just seeing something interesting . . ."

"Did it have anything to do with me?" the Lady in Blue asked.

". . . when the devil took the glass away from me and said, 'How do you explain this little instrument, my dear Professor?'

" 'I don't have to,' I replied. 'You can expect scientific explanations from me, but your glass is obviously an invention of the devil — that is to say, some devilish trick which has nothing in common with the natural sciences. You would have to prove first that it is a bona fide optical instrument before you could expect an exposition of theory.' The devil said something which

sounded like 'damn you,' but I pretended not to hear. Then he continued: 'But the fact that we move with ten times the speed of light (I have just restored that rate), this is something you must be able to explain. I take that to be a technological problem and if you don't know the answer I don't have to waste any more time on you. After all I am not obliged to chauffeur you for  $10^{17}$  kilometers; I can throw you out right now and then you'll be a meteorite.'

"This was dangerous. I thought as I have never thought before and I never want to think that hard again. Fortunately I have also studied philosophy. I decided to treat it as abstractly as I could. The devil yelled at me; he was sure that he had won. 'Quit stalling!' he bellowed. 'You realize,' I told him, 'that there are two explanations: one if you take this to be a problem in psychology and another one if you accept it as a problem in metaphysics. If it is a psychological problem, you are merely my own dream-image.' The devil made a movement as if he wanted to throw me out into space and I talked fast: 'That won't help you, that wouldn't prove a thing. Because if you are merely my dream-image your throwing me into space would be just a part of the same dream and in the end I'd wake up, probably having fallen asleep at my desk.' 'You *are* awake!' screamed the devil. 'I think so too,' I said, 'for if this should turn out to be a dream it would be a rather trite device, don't you think? Been used over and over again.' — 'Well, go on then.' — 'All right. Let's review it as a problem in metaphysics. There are then two explanations, one more in the field of natural philosophy, the other more in the field of ethics.'

"'Sir!' the devil shouted at me. 'You can drive *me* crazy! I don't want two explanations; I want the right one.' — 'But your question of how we can move so fast covers two different problems. I could ask, How does he get all the energy that is needed for this velocity? Or I could ask, Where does he come from himself?'

"The devil looked at me in a manner which made me ashamed; I had never believed that there could be such a stupid look on my face. 'You have no right to ask anything,' he said after a while; 'I ask the questions around here.' — 'But would you kindly permit me just one question?' I said as politely as possible. 'And that one merely to avoid unnecessary elaborations on my part?' — 'This I'll grant,' he said quite gently; 'one question and I'll answer it. But that's the last, or else . . .'

"'Can you work *miracles*?'

"The change in the devil's appearance was almost pathetic. He did not look like me anymore, he looked like a very unhappy man, or like a great lord of much power who has suddenly fainted and is ashamed of this lapse. 'What do you mean by that question? I cannot *create* anything.' — 'I mean,'



I said, 'could you cause sudden changes in the distribution of matter and of energy which would be inexplicable?' He laughed. 'Inexplicable to you? That would be worth a lot! You don't know anything. You are finite spirits and helpless when it comes to the infinite. But I can reach into the infinite where there are endless world systems with endless varieties of energy and I could move things into your puny galaxy which would make your hairs stand on end.'

" 'Ahem,' I said. 'So you simply took the energy you needed from an infinitely distant stellar system?' — 'Not quite, but almost. It does not come from a very distant system but from a place which you cannot even comprehend.' — 'Well, then, the thing has been explained. The only question left is why you did it at all. I'll permit myself to observe that you have done something quite foolish.' The devil jumped up and sparks literally flew from his eyes; I rued my words. 'You worm!' he thundered. 'How dare you judge the actions of Infinite Spirits. I'd crush you if . . . well, if you were not right.' He became silent and I felt that I did not have much to fear. As long as I was right nothing could happen to me, it seemed. I believed that I understood the situation: no matter how much power was vested in the devil, there was one thing more powerful, namely reason. But that did not help me much. How could I get out of the spot I was in? I did not want to travel through space for years. But I had no right to ask more questions."

The Quiet Young Man sighed deeply in sympathy and took a careful sip from the glass of lemonade in front of him. The Professor got his cigar going again and continued:

" 'You said,' I began carefully, 'that I should not judge the actions of Infinite Spirits. That sounds as if there were more than one.' — 'Just two,' the devil said with a tired voice. 'I am one and I don't like to discuss the other.' — 'Hm, the other one . . . ' — 'Keep quiet!' he interrupted me. — 'I only wanted to say,' I went on, 'that he could also reach into the infinite and produce great miracles.' — 'No!' yelled the devil, furious again. 'He doesn't do that. He doesn't have to. He is Reason himself. He has arranged everything so that it runs by itself. He makes no mistakes and therefore He needs no miracles to correct His mistakes. That is what's wrong with me!'

" 'Ah so . . . In short you have power, but not the power of reason.' — 'Yes, Professor, right again. My lot is to make all the mistakes in the universe. But it doesn't get me anywhere, reason always corrects everything I do. My acts of unreason simply perish because they *are* unreason. But' — he brightened a bit — 'at least I have all infinity at my disposal. Even though the mistakes I make are always automatically straightened out, I

can always make more mistakes. You have no idea how much disorder I have initiated with just this little trip.' — 'I still think you could have done something more spectacular. Why don't you blow up the earth? Why don't you squeeze the whole galaxy into one lump of star matter?' — 'Useless,' said the devil, 'useless like everything else. What does it signify how matter and energy are distributed in the universe? There is so much of it that the ruination of a galaxy would hardly be noticed. No, I can do better by taking a philosopher, like you. That will cause some damage to reason itself, I hope.'

" 'Most flattering! But why didn't you take people like Socrates, Galilei and Kant?' — 'I did, I did. If you remember your history you know that I got them into trouble with the authorities. Unfortunately I was late on many occasions. . . . Since you won't get back [*ouch!* I thought] I might as well say this aloud for once. I have the power; but it is worthless, because space is infinite. That's the basic trouble. If I should feel like changing the Milky Way into Bavarian beer I can do that. But it would still be in space and the Other One can change it back into suns, planets and moons.'

" 'But if,' I said, 'space were *not* infinite? If space curved back into itself . . . ' 'Yes, if!' the devil laughed aloud. 'If it were something like a large round box, you could stay inside and run in circles, but you could also throw things out of it.' "

"I am so happy," the Quiet Young Man said suddenly, "that the devil cannot really do anything, not even with Bavarian beer."

The Professor threw him a surprised glance. "Don't be happy too soon," he said.

"But beer is one of the devil's inventions. I always thought alcohol was his most important tool."

"The devil does not agree with you there. I know, for we talked about it. I had a plan forming in my mind and in order to gain time to think about it I steered the discussion in the direction of some of the minor things the devil might do. And he told me that he, on earth, is greatly concerned with the furtherance of the Temperance Leagues. Yes, he admitted, a number of people drink themselves to death and become his prey. But not many and mostly those he'd get anyway. But anti-alcoholism, once it has taken hold as a habit, will tend to preserve the weak-willed too . . . "

"But some alcoholics . . . "

"Please, I am only repeating what the devil told me. He maintains that, if nobody takes a drink anymore, the human race will wipe itself out in about three generations, mostly by way of digestive disorders. That is why he, in many disguises, is the benefactor of many Temperance organizations."

"Herr Professor!" the Quiet Young Man said with a sigh, while the Fat



Man finished his beer and the Lady in Blue asked for a glass of wine.

"Please go on now and tell us just how you got rid of the devil."

"With pleasure," said the Professor. "As you must have gathered we had started talking generally and I asked the devil just how he stopped his spaceship. 'Hoho!' he cried. 'Do you really think I'll tell you that? Reveal the manipulation of the infinite vector to a mortal? You couldn't understand it even if I wanted to explain. I merely move my hands, like this, then like that, and then I'd do something else and we'd obtain whatever energy we need.' — 'You mean,' I asked, 'that we could travel still faster?' — 'Of course, a thousand times as fast as light, or a million times.' — 'That,' I said, 'I don't believe.' — 'Sir!' — 'Beg pardon, but not 20,000,000 times as fast as light?' — 'I'll show you! But then leave me in peace; I don't intend to keep talking to you all the time.'

"The devil moved his hands strangely, or one of them because he held me with the other. I could see that we had attained an incredible speed: the star systems to our sides receded rapidly, and I figured out that we moved about six million million kilometers per second, a little more than half a light year per second. Right after that the devil went to sleep."

The Professor paused to light another cigar.

"Just a moment," the Fat Man said. "I can believe the limitless energy, what with radium and all the things we don't know. But that the devil should need sleep like any of us, that is a bit hard to take."

"Yes," the Professor grinned openly. "I was sure he did not sleep. I reasoned that he probably had other things to do but that he did not want to leave me unsupervised. So he made whatever he left behind appear to be sleeping, but I was sure that it was a kind of reporting device which would call him the instant I started meddling with the machinery."

"But why did you ask for this high speed, Herr Professor?" said Mrs. Broesen. "I've been wondering about that. If I understood you correctly you were to travel, oh some awful distance and the real punishment was to come after that. If I had been you I would have asked for the lowest speed the devil would permit."

"But I wanted to get home quickly because of my unfinished work. To do that I had to fly as fast as possible, in a straight line."

"I still don't understand," Mrs. Broesen insisted. "Couldn't you explain this a little more clearly?"

"Suppose that you traveled due West from here in a straight line. Since the earth is a sphere you would, in the end, return to this city, coming from the East."

"I know that much myself. But the galaxy is not a sphere and you did not travel at its surface."

"No, but space itself is curved; we just don't notice it. Formerly people also thought that the earth was flat. Now we all know better. As for space, some mathematicians have suspected for quite some time that it *might* be curved. They could not prove it, they could just say that it might be so without changing the laws of logical thought. Well, I succeeded in discovering that space *is* curved. The devil did not know that because my paper hasn't been published yet. I also calculated the radius of curvature; in short our space is not a Euclidean space but what I call an elliptical space, and its radius of curvature is 3000 light years, so that light needs somewhat over 10,000 years to return to the point of origin."

"In that case," the Fat Man said, "we should see two suns in the sky, the second sun being the light rays that have traveled around once. But there is no counter-sun."

"There would be one," the Professor retorted, "there would be one if there were less dust in space. But there is so much dust that even the most powerful sun cannot shine all the way around. We can't see that far and the devil can't either. The proof is, after all, that I did travel all the way around!"

"In a straight line?" the Fat Man said.

"In a straight line! But let me go on with my story. While the devil had this apparently sleeping thing next to me which, as I said, I suspected of being a reporting device, I did not dare to move. So I sat for four hours. I wondered whether we would get even somewhere near our solar system. I worried that we would simply overshoot it, since I could not stop the space ship. Even if I had known how, I would not have known when to do it; at that speed one could not possibly recognize any constellations. I grew hungry and thirsty for I had nothing to eat or to drink, not even a cigar to smoke. I just sat, motionless, worrying."

"I feel really sorry for you," said the Lady in Blue.

"I felt sorry for myself. Of course I saw fantastic things, wisps of light dissolved into starry skies and then condensed again into glittering clouds. But I sat hour after hour near the sleeping devil and debated whether I should call him. Then all of a sudden I felt my seat disappear from under me, but some counterforce kept me in the cabin. I realized at once that the stars were standing still and that the yellowish star ahead might even be our own sun. The devil came to at the same instant. He said that he had not really intended to maintain the 20,000,000 times light velocity and finish the trip in just five hours. At that moment a new fear struck me. The devil had spoken as if he were unaware of the curvature of space. But the length of the trip which he had decreed for me was almost precisely what I had calculated to be the 'circumference' of our space.

"But while I was thinking that, I heard him talk to nobody in particular: 'Just where in the universe are we now? I can't understand that. We are back in the solar system, quite near the orbit of Neptune. But we left on the other side. If the ship had deviated from the straight line I'd have known it at once.' I then realized that he really did not know. Whether the agreement between his and my figures was pure coincidence or whether it had deeper reasons not known to either of us was unimportant, the devil still took space to be infinite.

" 'If you'll permit me,' I said, 'I'll explain this to you. I hope that you then will . . . ' — 'No, I won't!' he said sharply. 'The trip is over and now I'll do with you as I please. But I can listen to the explanation first.' — 'Ahem,' I said. For once I did not like explaining something. 'You simply made a mistake in assuming that space is infinite. Our mathematicians have known for a long time that an infinity of types of space is possible. They just could not prove which of the possible types applied to our own space. But now we have traveled  $10^{17}$  kilometers in a straight line and we are back about where we started. This should convince you that our space is *finite*. I have known that for a long time.'

"The devil was perfectly quiet for quite a while. Then he said: 'What, our space is actually curved? Which means that it is not infinite? And I never realized that? Of course I have never made such a long trip at such speed. But if — well, if that is really so, maybe the Other One doesn't know it either. That proves that Reason itself is mistaken! But then *I* have won. Then the law of the conservation of matter and energy is nonsense. I can destroy by throwing things out of space. Well, well, what no god and no devil ever even suspected has been found by a Professor!'

"I did feel quite ashamed, but then I said, 'Would you now consider . . . ?' — 'Of course, of course, I'll bring you back to earth immediately!'

"Hohoho!" the Fat Man laughed loud and long. "You have been had! Do you really think you are better off here?"

The Professor remained silent, just nodding his head. Then he reached for his glass and another cigar.

"Well, and then? What came then?" Mrs. Broesen wanted to know.

"That was the last I heard of the devil. I found myself in my study. The clock said 2:25 A.M. Sunday. I was dead tired and went to bed at once."

"But, Herr Professor," said the Lady in Blue, "is this story really true?"

"Of course it is, every word of it."

"*Prosit, Professor!*" said the Fat Man. The Quiet Young Man switched from lemonade to ice water, opened his mouth and closed it again. And the Lady in Blue remarked, "Well, anyway, it was nice of the devil to bring you back."