



The Devil's Match: The Story of a Farmer Who Remembered What His Grandmother Told Him

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Easy

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Once upon a time there was a poor farmer who lived in a wretched tumble-down cottage beyond the village and whose farm consisted of a miserable little field no bigger than your hand. His children were ragged and hungry and his wife was always worried over getting them enough to eat.

Yet the farmer was a clever fellow with a quick shrewd wit and people used to say that he'd be able to fool the devil if ever he had the chance. One day the chance came.

His wife had sent him into the forest to gather a bundle of faggots. Suddenly without any warning a young man with black face and shiny eyes stood before him.

“It’s a devil, of course,” the farmer told himself. “But even so there’s no use being frightened.”

So he wished the devil a civil good-day and the devil, who was really a very simple fellow indeed, returned his greeting and asked him what he was doing in the forest.

Now the farmer suddenly remembered that his grandmother had once told him devils were afraid of lime trees because the bast from lime trees is the one thing in the world they are unable to break. That’s why, when you catch a devil, you must tie his hands together with bast.

So the farmer, recalling what his grandmother had said, remarked casually:

“Oh, I’m looking for a lime tree. I want to strip off some bast. Then I’m going after them”—and when he said them he paused significantly—“and tie them hand and foot.”

He peeped at the devil out of the corner of his eye and saw that the devil had turned almost white under his black skin.

“He is a foolish one!” he thought to himself.

“Oh, don’t do that!” the devil cried. “What have we ever done to you?”

The farmer pretended to be firm and repeated that that was just what he was going to do.

“Please listen to me,” the devil begged. “If you promise to let us alone I tell you what I’ll do: I’ll bring you such a big bag of gold that it will make you a rich man.”

At first the farmer, being a shrewd fellow, pretended that he cared nothing for money. Then gradually he let himself be persuaded and at last said:

“Very well. If you bring me the gold within an hour I won’t bind you with bast. But don’t keep me waiting or I may change my mind.”

The young devil—oh, you never saw a more stupid young fellow!—scurried off and, long before the hour was up, he came panting back with a great big bag of gold.

“Is that enough?” he asked.

The farmer who had really never seen so much money in all his life hemmed and hawed but finally said:

“Well, it isn’t as much as I expected but I’ll accept it.”

The young devil, delighted with his bargain, hurried back to hell and told all his black comrades how grateful they ought to be to him for saving them from the farmer who was planning to bind them, hand and foot, with bast.

When the other devils heard the whole story, they laughed at him loud and long.

“You are certainly the stupidest devil in hell!” they said. “Why, that man has made a fool of you!”

They discussed the matter among themselves and decided that the devil would have to get back the bag of gold or the story would leak out and thereafter the people on earth would have no more respect for devils.

“Go back to the farmer,” they said, “and dare him to a wrestling match. Tell him that whoever wins the match is to keep the gold.”

So the young devil went back to earth and dared the farmer to a wrestling match. The farmer, who saw how things were, said:

“My dear young friend, if I were to wrestle with you I’m afraid I’d hurt you for I’m awfully strong. I tell you what I’ll do: I’ll let you wrestle with my old grandfather. He’s ninety-nine years old but even so he’s more nearly in your class.”

The devil agreed to this and the farmer—oh, but that farmer was a sly one!—led him out into the forest to a cave where a big brown bear lay asleep.

“There’s my grandfather,” the farmer said. “Go wake him up and make him wrestle.”

The devil shook the bear and said:

“Wake up, old man! Wake up! We’re going to wrestle!”

The bear opened his little eyes, stood up on his hind legs, and taking the devil in his arms hugged him until the devil thought his bones would all be crushed. It was as much as the devil could do to escape with his life.

“Oh, my poor ribs! My poor ribs!” he gasped when he was safely back in hell. “He’s a terrible man—that farmer! Why, even his old grandfather is so strong that I thought he’d squeeze me to death!”

But when he had told his full story the other devils laughed at him louder than before and told him that the farmer had again fooled him.

“You’ve got to try another match with him,” they said. “This time dare him to a foot race and mind you don’t let him fool you.”

So in a day or two when the soreness was gone from his bones the devil went back to earth and dared the farmer to run a foot race with him.

“Certainly,” the farmer said, “but it’s hardly fair to let you run against me because I go like the wind. I tell you what I’ll do: I’ll let you race with my small son. He’s only a year old and perhaps you can beat him.”

The devil—I never knew a more stupid fellow in my life!—agreed to this and the farmer took him out to a meadow. Under some bushes he showed him a rabbit’s hole.

“My little boy’s asleep in there,” he said. “Call him out.”

“Little boy!” the devil called. “Come out and run a race with me!”

Instantly a rabbit jumped out of the hole and went hoppetylop across the meadow. The devil tried hard to overtake him but couldn’t. He ran on and on. They came at last to a deep ravine. The rabbit leaped across but the devil, when he tried to do the same, slipped and fell and went rolling down over stones and brambles, down, down, down, into a brook. When he had dragged himself out of the water, bruised and scratched, the rabbit had disappeared.

“I’ve had enough of that farmer,” the devil said when he got back to hell. “Why, do you know, he has a small boy just one year old and I tell you there isn’t one of you can beat that boy running!”

But the devils when they heard the rest of the story only laughed and jeered and told their comrade that the farmer had again tricked him.

“You’ve got to go back to him another time,” they said. “It will never do for people to get the idea that devils are such fools.”

“But I tell you I won’t dare him to another wrestling match,” the young devil said, “nor to a foot race, either.”

“Try whistling this time,” his comrades told him. “You ought to be able to beat him whistling. Now have your wits about you and don’t let him fool you again.”

So the devil went back to earth and said to the farmer:

“We’ve got to have another contest for that bag of money. This time let’s try whistling.”

“Very well,” the farmer said. “We’ll have a whistling match.”

They went off into the forest and the farmer told the devil to whistle first.

The devil whistled and all the leaves on the trees shook and trembled. He whistled again and the twigs began to crackle and break. He whistled a third time and big branches snapped off and fell to the ground.

“There!” the devil exclaimed, “Can you beat that?”

“My poor boy,” the farmer said. (Oh, but that farmer was a tricky one!) “Is that the best you can do? Why, when I whistle, if you don’t cover up your ears you’ll be deafened! And as likely as not a tree will fall on you and kill you! Now shall I begin?”

“Wait a minute!” the devil begged. “Won’t you please tie up my ears before you begin because I don’t want to be deafened.”

This was just what the farmer was hoping the devil would say. So he took out a big kerchief and put it over the devil’s ears and also over his eyes and tied it behind in a hard knot.

“Now then!” he shouted. “Take care!”

With that he began to whistle and as he whistled he picked up a big branch off the ground and gave the devil an awful crack over the head.

“My head! My head!” the devil cried.

“My poor fellow!” the farmer said, pretending to be very sympathetic. “I hope that tree as it fell down didn’t hurt you! Now I’m going to whistle again and you must be more careful.”

This time when he whistled the farmer struck the devil over the head harder than before.

“That’s enough!” the devil shouted. “Another tree has fallen on me! Stop! Stop!”

“No,” the farmer insisted. “You whistled three times and I’m going to whistle three times. Are you ready?”

The poor devil had to say: “Yes,” and thereupon the farmer began to whistle and at the same time to beat the devil over his head and shoulders until the devil supposed that the whole forest was falling on him.

“Stop whistling!” he shouted. “Stop or I’ll be killed!”

But the farmer wouldn’t stop until he was too exhausted to beat the devil any longer.

Then he paused and asked:

“Shall I whistle some more?”

“No! No! No!” the devil roared. “Undo the kerchief and let me go and I swear I’ll never come back!”

So the farmer undid the kerchief and the devil fled, too terrified to stop even long enough to look around for all those fallen trees.

He never came back and the farmer was left in undisputed possession of the gold.

“I owe all my good fortune to my old grandmother,” the farmer used to say, “for she it was who told me to tie them with bast.”

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