



The Shoemaker's Apron: The Story of the Man Who Sits Near the Golden Gate

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*Easy
9 min read*

There was once a shoemaker who made so little at his trade that his wife suffered and his children went hungry. In desperation he offered to sell his soul to a devil.

“How much do you want for your soul?” the devil asked him.

“I want work enough to give me a good livelihood,” the shoemaker said, “so that my wife won’t suffer nor my children starve.”

The devil agreed to this and the shoemaker put his mark on the contract. After that trade improved and soon the little shoemaker was happy and prosperous.

Now one night it happened that Christ and the blessed St. Peter, who were walking about on earth, stopped at the little shoemaker’s cottage and asked for a night’s lodging. The shoemaker received them most hospitably.

He had his wife cook them a fine supper and after supper he gave them his own bed to sleep on while he and his wife went to the garret and slept on straw.

In the morning he had his wife prepare them a good breakfast and after breakfast he took them on their way for a mile or two.

As he was leaving them, St. Peter whispered to Christ:

“Master, this poor man has given us of his best. Don’t you think you ought to reward him?”

Christ nodded and, turning to the little shoemaker, he said:

“For your kindness to us this day I will reward you. Make three wishes and they will be granted.”

The shoemaker thanked Christ and said:

“Well then, these are my wishes: first, may whoever sits down on my cobbler’s stool be unable to get up until I permit him; second, may whoever looks into the window of my cottage have to stand there until I let him go; and third, may whoever shakes the pear-tree in my garden stick to the tree until I set him free.”

“Your wishes will be granted,” Christ promised. Then he and St. Peter went on their way and the shoemaker returned to his cottage.

The years went by and at last one afternoon the devil stood before the shoemaker and said:

“Ho, shoemaker, your time has come! Are you ready?”

“Just let me have a bite of supper first,” the shoemaker said. “In the meantime you sit down here on my stool and rest yourself.”

The devil who had been walking up and down the earth since sunrise was tired and so was glad enough to sit down.

After supper the little shoemaker said:

“Now then, I’m ready. Come on.”

The devil tried to stand up but of course he couldn’t. He pulled this way and that. He stretched, he rolled from side to side until his bones ached, but all to no avail. He could not get up from the stool.

“Brother!” he cried in terror, “help me off this cursed stool and I’ll give you seven more years—I swear I will!”

At that promise the shoemaker allowed the devil to stand up, and the devil scurried off as fast as he could.

He was true to his word. He didn’t come back for seven years. When he did come he was too clever to risk sitting down again on the cobbler’s stool. He didn’t even venture inside the cottage door. Instead, he stood at the window and called out:

“Ho, shoemaker, here I am again! Your time has come! Are you ready?”

“I’ll be ready in a moment,” the shoemaker said, “Just let me put a last stitch in these shoes.”

When the shoemaker had finished sewing the shoes, he put aside his work, bade his wife good-bye, and said to the devil:

“Now then, I’m ready. Let us go.”

But the devil when he tried to move away from the window found that he was held fast. It was as if his feet had been soldered to the earth. In great fright he cried out:

“Oh, my dear little shoemaker, help me! I can’t move!”

“What’s this trick you’re playing on me?” the shoemaker said. “Now I’m ready to go and you aren’t! What do you mean by making a fool of me this way?”

“Just help me to get free,” the devil cried, “and I’ll do anything in the world for you! I’ll give you seven more years! I swear I will!”

“Very well,” the shoemaker said, “then I’ll help you this time. But never again! Now remember: I won’t let you make a fool of me a third time!”

So the shoemaker freed the devil from the window and the devil without another word scurried off.

At the end of another seven years he appeared again. But this time he was too clever to look in the window. He didn’t even come near the cottage. Instead he stood off in the garden under the pear-tree and called out:

“Ho, there, shoemaker! Your time has come and I am here to get you! Are you ready?”

“I’ll be ready in a moment,” the shoemaker said. “Just wait until I put away my tools. If you feel like it, shake yourself down a nice ripe pear.”

The devil shook the pear-tree and of course when he tried to stop he couldn’t. He shook until all the pears had fallen. He kept on and presently he had shaken off all the leaves.

When the shoemaker came out and saw the tree stripped and bare and the devil still shaking it, he pretended to fall into a fearful rage.

“Hi, there, you! What do you mean shaking down all my pears! Stop it! Do you hear me? Stop it!”

“But I can’t stop it!” the poor devil cried.

“We’ll see about that!” the shoemaker said.

He ran back into the cottage and got a long leather strap. Then he began beating the devil unmercifully over his head and shoulders.

The devil made such an outcry that all the village heard him and came running to see what was the matter.

“Help! Help!” the devil cried. “Make the shoemaker stop beating me!”

But all the people thought the shoemaker was doing just right to punish the black fellow for shaking down all his pears and they urged the shoemaker to beat him harder.

“My poor head! My poor shoulders!” the devil moaned. “If ever I get loose from this cursed pear-tree I’ll never

come back here! I swear I won't!"

The shoemaker, when he heard this, laughed in his sleeve and let the devil go.

The devil was true to his word. He never again returned. So the shoemaker lived, untroubled, to a ripe old age.

Just before he died he asked that his cobbler's apron be buried with him and his sons carried out his wish.

As soon as he died the little shoemaker trudged up to heaven and knocked timidly at the golden gate. St. Peter opened the gate a little crack and peeped out. When he saw the shoemaker he shook his head and said:

"Little shoemaker, heaven is no place for you. While you were alive you sold your soul to the ruler of the other place and now you must go there."

With that St. Peter shut the golden gate and locked it.

The little shoemaker sighed and said to himself:

"Well, I suppose I must go where St. Peter says."

So he put on a bold front and tramped down to hell. When the devil who knew him saw him coming, he shouted out to his fellow devils:

"Brothers, on guard! Here comes that terrible little shoemaker! Lock every gate! Don't let him in or he'll drive us all out of hell!"

The devils in great fright scurried about and locked and barred all the gates, and the little shoemaker when he arrived could not get in.

He knocked and knocked but no one would answer.

"They don't seem to want me here," he said to himself. "I suppose I'll have to try heaven again."

So he trudged back to St. Peter and explained to him that hell was locked up tight.

"No matter," St. Peter said. "As I told you before heaven is no place for you."

The little shoemaker, tired and dejected, went back to hell but again the devils, when they saw him coming, locked every gate and kept him out.

In desperation the little shoemaker returned to heaven and pounded loudly on the golden gate. Thinking from the noise that some very important saint had arrived, St. Peter flung open the gate. Quick as a flash the little shoemaker threw his leather apron inside, then hopped in himself under St. Peter's elbow and squatted down on the apron.

In great excitement St. Peter tried to turn him out of heaven, but the little shoemaker shouted:

“You can't touch me! You can't touch me! I'm sitting on my own property! Let me alone!”

He raised such a hubbub that all the angels and the blessed saints came running to see what was happening. Presently Lord Jesus himself came and the little shoemaker explained to him how he just had to stay in heaven as the devils wouldn't let him into hell.

“Now, Master,” St. Peter said, “what am I to do? You know yourself we can't keep this fellow in heaven.”

But Lord Jesus, looking with pity on the poor little shoemaker, said to St. Peter:

“Just let him stay where he is. He won't bother any one sitting here near the gate.”

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