



# *The Devil's Hide: The Story of the Boy Who Wouldn't Lose His Temper*

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Finnish

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*Easy*  
*20 min read*

There was once a Finnish boy who got the best of the Devil. His name was Erkki. Erkki had two brothers who were, of course, older than he. They both tried their luck with the Devil and got the worst of it. Then Erkki tried his luck. They were sure Erkki, too, would be worsted, but he wasn't. Here is the whole story:

One day the oldest brother said:

"It's time for me to go out into the world and earn my living. Do you two younger ones wait here at home until you hear how I get on."

The younger boys agreed to this and the oldest brother started out. He was unable to get employment until by chance he met the Devil. The Devil at once offered him a place but on very strange terms.

"Come work for me," the Devil said, "and I promise that you'll be comfortably housed and well fed. We'll make this bargain: the first of us who loses his temper will forfeit to the other enough of his own hide to sole a pair of

boots. If I lose my temper first, you may exact from me a big patch of my hide. If you lose your temper first, I'll exact the same from you."

The oldest brother agreed to this and the Devil at once took him home and set him to work.

"Take this ax," he said, "and go out behind the house and chop me some firewood."

The oldest brother took the ax and went out to the woodpile.

"Chopping wood is easy enough," he thought to himself.

But at the first blow he found that the ax had no edge. Try as he would he couldn't cut a single log.

"I'd be a fool to stay here and waste my time with such an ax!" he cried.

So he threw down the ax and ran away thinking to escape the Devil and get work somewhere else. But the Devil had no intention of letting him escape. He ran after him, overtook him, and asked him what he meant leaving thus without notice.

"I don't want to work for you!" the oldest brother cried, petulantly.

"Very well," the Devil said, "but don't lose your temper about it."

"I will so lose my temper!" the oldest brother declared. "The idea—expecting me to cut wood with such an ax!"

"Well," the Devil remarked, "since you insist on losing your temper, you'll have to forfeit me enough of your hide to sole a pair of boots! That was our bargain."

The oldest brother howled and protested but to no purpose. The Devil was firm. He took out a long knife and slit off enough of the oldest brother's hide to sole a pair of big boots.

"Now then, my boy," he said, "now you may go."

The oldest brother went limping home complaining bitterly at the hard fate that had befallen him.

"I'm tired and sick," he told his brothers, "and I'm going to stay home and rest. One of you will have to go out and get work."

The second brother at once said that he'd be delighted to try his luck in the world. So he started out and he had

exactly the same experience. At first he could get no work, then he met the Devil and the Devil made exactly the same bargain with him that he had made with the oldest brother. He took the second brother home with him, gave him the same dull ax, and sent him out to the woodpile. After the first stroke the second brother threw down the ax in disgust and tried to run off and the Devil, of course, wouldn't let him go until he, too, had submitted to the loss of a great patch of hide. So it was no time at all before the second brother came limping home complaining bitterly at fate.

"What ails you two?" Erkki said.

"You go out into the cruel world and hunt work," they told him, "and you'll find out soon enough what ails us! And when you do find out you needn't come limping home expecting sympathy from us for you won't get it!"

So the very next day Erkki started out, leaving his brothers at home nursing their sore backs and their injured feelings.

Well, Erkki had exactly the same experience. At first he could get work nowhere, then later he met the Devil and went into his employ on exactly the same terms as his brothers.

The Devil handed him the same dull ax and sent him out to the woodpile. At the first blow Erkki knew that the ax had lost its edge and would never cut a single log. But instead of being discouraged and losing his temper, he only laughed.

"I suppose the Devil thinks I'll lose my hide over a trifle like this!" he said. "Well, I just won't!"

He dropped the ax and, going over to the woodpile, began pulling it down. Under all the logs he found the Devil's cat. It was an evil looking creature with a gray head.

"Ha!" thought Erkki, "I bet anything you've got something to do with this!"

He raised the dull ax and with one blow cut off the evil creature's head. Sure enough the ax instantly recovered its edge and after that Erkki had no trouble at all in chopping as much firewood as the Devil wanted.

That night at supper the Devil said:

"Well, Erkki, did you finish the work I gave you?"

“Yes, master, I’ve chopped all that wood.”

The Devil was surprised.

“Really?”

“Yes, master. You can go out and see for yourself.”

“Then you found something in the woodpile, didn’t you?”

“Nothing but an awful looking old cat.”

The Devil started.

“Did you do anything to that cat?”

“I only chopped its head off and threw it away.”

“What!” the Devil cried angrily. “Didn’t you know that was my cat!”

“There now, master,” Erkki said soothingly, “you’re not going to lose your temper over a little thing like a dead cat, are you? Don’t forget our bargain!”

The Devil swallowed his anger and murmured:

“No, I’m not going to lose my temper but I must say that was no way to treat my cat.”

The next day the Devil ordered Erkki to go out to the forest and bring home some logs on the ox sledge.

“My black dog will go with you,” he said, “and as you come home you’re to take exactly the same course the dog takes.”

Well, Erkki went out to the forest and loaded the ox sledge with logs and then drove the oxen home following the Devil’s black dog. As they reached the Devil’s house the black dog jumped through a hole in the gate.

“I must follow master’s orders,” Erkki said to himself.

So he cut up the oxen into small pieces and put them through the same hole in the gate; he chopped up the logs and pitched them through the hole; and he broke up the sledge into pieces small enough to follow the oxen and

the logs. Then he crept through the hole himself.

That night at supper the Devil said:

“Well, Erkki, did you come home the way I told you?”

“Yes, master, I followed the black dog.”

“What!” the Devil cried. “Do you mean to say you brought the oxen and the sledge and the logs through the hole in the gate?”

“Yes, master, that’s what I did.”

“But you couldn’t!” the Devil declared.

“Well, master,” Erkki said, “just go out and see.”

The Devil went outside and when he saw the method by which Erkki had carried out his orders he was furious. But Erkki quieted him by saying:

“There now, master, you’re not going to lose your temper over a trifling matter like this, are you? Remember our bargain!”

“N-n-no,” the Devil said, again swallowing his anger, “I’m not going to lose my temper, but I want you to understand, Erkki, that I think you’ve acted very badly in this!”

All that evening the Devil fumed and fussed about Erkki.

“We’ve got to get rid of that boy! That’s all there is about it!” he said to his wife.

Of course whenever Erkki was in sight the Devil tried to smile and look pleasant, but as soon as Erkki was gone he went back at once to his grievance. He declared emphatically:

“There’s no living in peace and comfort with such a boy around!”

“Well,” his wife said, “if you feel that way about it, why don’t you kill him to-night when he’s asleep? We could throw his body into the lake and no one be the wiser.”

“That’s a fine idea!” the Devil said. “Wake me up some time after midnight and I’ll do it!”

Now Erkki overheard this little plan, so that night he kept awake. When he knew from their snoring that the Devil and his wife were sound asleep, he slipped over to their bed, quietly lifted the Devil’s wife in his arms, and without awakening her placed her gently in his own bed. Then he put on some of her clothes and laid himself down beside the Devil in the wife’s place.

Presently he nudged the Devil awake.

“What do you want?” the Devil mumbled.

“Sst!” Erkki whispered. “Isn’t it time we got up and killed Erkki?”

“Yes,” the Devil answered, “it is. Come along.”

They got up quietly and the Devil reached down a great sword from the wall. Then they crept over to Erkki’s bed and the Devil with one blow cut off the head of the person who was lying there asleep.

“Now,” he said, “we’ll just carry out the bed and all and dump it in the lake.”

So Erkki took one end of the bed and the Devil the other and, stumbling and slipping in the darkness, they carried it down to the lake and pitched it in.

“That’s a good job done!” the Devil said with a laugh.

Then they went back to bed together and the Devil fell instantly asleep.

The next morning when he got up for breakfast, there was Erkki stirring the porridge.

“How—did you get here?” the Devil asked. “I mean—I mean where is my wife?”

“Your wife? Don’t you remember,” Erkki said, “you cut off her head last night and then we threw her into the lake, bed and all! But no one will be the wiser!”

“W-wh-what!” the Devil cried, and he was about to fly into an awful rage when Erkki restrained him by saying:

“There now, master, you’re not going to lose your temper over a little thing like a wife, are you? Remember our bargain!”

So the Devil was forced again to swallow his anger.

“No, I’m not going to lose my temper,” he said, “but I tell you frankly, Erkki, I don’t think that was a nice trick for you to play on me!”

Well, the Devil felt lonely not having a wife about the house, so in a few days he decided to go off wooing for a new one.

“And, Erkki,” he said, “I expect you to keep busy while I’m gone. Here’s a keg of red paint. Now get to work and have the house all blazing red by the time I get back.”

“All blazing red,” Erkki repeated. “Very well, master, trust me to have it all blazing red by the time you get back!”

As soon as the Devil was gone, Erkki set the house a-fire and in a short time the whole sky was lighted up with the red glow of the flames. In great fright the Devil hurried back and got there in time to see the house one mass of fire.

“You see, master,” Erkki said, “I’ve done as you told me. It looks very pretty, doesn’t it? all blazing red!”

The Devil almost choked with rage.

“You—you—” he began, but Erkki restrained him by saying:

“There now, master, you’re not going to lose your temper over a little thing like a house a-fire, are you? Remember our bargain!”

From the bones of the cattle he laid three bridges

The Devil swallowed hard and said:

“N—no, I’m not going to lose my temper, but I must say, Erkki, that I’m very much annoyed with you!”

The next day the Devil wanted to go a-wooing again and before he started he said to Erkki:

“Now, no nonsense this time! While I’m gone you’re to build three bridges over the lake, but they’re not to be built of wood or stone or iron or earth. Do you understand?”

Erkki pretended to be frightened.

“That’s a pretty hard task you’ve given me, master!”

“Hard or easy, see that you get it done!” the Devil said.

Erkki waited until the Devil was gone, then he went out to the field and slaughtered all the Devil’s cattle. From the bones of the cattle he laid three bridges across the lake, using the skulls for one bridge, the ribs for another, and the legs and the hoofs for the third. Then when the Devil got back, Erkki met him and pointing to the bridges said:

“See, master, there they are, three bridges put together without stick, stone, iron, or bit of earth!”

When the Devil found out that all his cattle had been slaughtered to give bones for the bridges, he was ready to kill Erkki, but Erkki quieted him by saying:

“There now, master, you’re not going to lose your temper over a little thing like the slaughter of a few cattle, are you? Remember our bargain!”

So again the Devil had to swallow his anger.

“No,” he said, “I’m not going to lose my temper exactly but I just want to tell you, Erkki, that I don’t think you’re behaving well!”

The Devil’s wooing was successful and pretty soon he brought home a new wife. The new wife didn’t like having Erkki about, so the Devil promised her he’d kill the boy.

“I’ll do it to-night,” he said, “when he’s asleep.”

Erkki overheard this and that night he put the churn in his bed under the covers, and where his head ordinarily would be he put a big round stone. Then he himself curled up on the stove and went comfortably to sleep.

During the night the Devil took his great sword from the wall and went over to Erkki's bed. His first blow hit the round stone and nicked the sword. His second blow struck sparks.

"Mercy me!" the Devil thought, "he's got a mighty hard head! I better strike lower!"

With the third stroke he hit the churn a mighty blow. The hoops flew apart and the churn collapsed.

The Devil went chuckling back to bed.

"Ha!" he said boastfully to his wife, "I got him that time!"

But the next morning when he woke up he didn't feel like laughing for there was Erkki as lively as ever and pretending that nothing had happened.

"What!" cried the Devil in amazement, "didn't you feel anything strike you last night while you were asleep?"

"Oh, I did feel a few mosquitoes brushing my cheek," Erkki said. "Nothing else."

"Steel doesn't touch him!" the Devil said to his wife. "I think I'll try fire on him."

So that night the Devil told Erkki to sleep in the threshing barn. Erkki carried his cot down to the threshing floor and then when it was dark he shifted it into the hay barn where he slept comfortably all night.

During the night the Devil set fire to the threshing barn. In the early dawn Erkki carried his cot back to the place of the threshing barn and in the morning when the Devil came out the first thing he saw was Erkki unharmed and peacefully sleeping among the smoking ruins.

"Mercy me, Erkki!" he shouted, shaking him awake, "have you been asleep all night?"

Erkki sat up and yawned.

"Yes, I've had a fine night's sleep. But I did feel a little chilly."

"Chilly!" the Devil gasped.

After that the Devil's one thought was to get rid of Erkki.

"That boy's getting on my nerves!" he told his wife. "I just can't stand him much longer! What are we going to

do about him?”

They discussed one plan after another and at last decided that the only way they'd ever get rid of him would be to move away and leave him behind.

“I'll send him out to the forest to chop wood all day,” the Devil said, “and while he's gone we'll row ourselves and all our belongings out to an island and when he comes back he won't know where we've gone.”

Erkki overheard this plan and the next day when they were sure he was safely at work in the forest he slipped back and hid himself in the bedclothes.

Well, when they got to the island and began unpacking their things there was Erkki in the bedclothes!

The Devil's new wife complained bitterly.

“If you really loved me,” she said, “you'd cut off that boy's head!”

“But I've tried to cut it off!” the Devil declared, “and I never can do it! Plague take such a boy! I've always known the Finns were an obstinate lot but I must say I've never met one as bad as Erkki! He's too much for me!”

But the Devil's wife kept on complaining until at last the Devil promised that he would try once again to cut off Erkki's head.

“Very well,” his wife said, “to-night when he's asleep I'll wake you.”

Well, what with the moving and everything the wife herself was tired and as soon as she went to bed she fell asleep. That gave Erkki just the very chance he needed to try on the new wife the trick he had played on the old one. Without waking her he carried her to his bed and then laid himself down in her place beside the Devil.

Then he waked up the Devil and reminded him that he had promised to cut off Erkki's head.

The poor old Devil got up and went over to Erkki's bed and of course cut off the head of his new wife.

The next morning when he had found out what he had done, he was perfectly furious.

“You get right out of here, Erkki!” he roared. “I never want to see you again!”

“There now, master,” Erkki said, “you’re not going to lose your temper over a little thing like a dead wife, are you?”

“I am so going to lose my temper!” the Devil shouted. “And what’s more it isn’t a little thing! I liked this wife, I did, and I don’t know where I’ll get another one I like as well! So you just clear out of here and be quick about it, too!”

“Very well, master,” Erkki said, “I’ll go but not until you pay me what you owe me.”

“What I owe you!” bellowed the Devil. “What about all you owe me for my house and my cattle and my old wife and my dear new wife and everything!”

“You’ve lost your temper,” Erkki said, “and now you’ve got to pay me a patch of your hide big enough to sole a pair of boots. That was our bargain!”

The Devil roared and blustered but Erkki was firm. He wouldn’t budge a step until the Devil had allowed him to slit a great patch of hide off his back.

That piece of the Devil’s hide made the finest soles that a pair of boots ever had. It wore for years and years and years. In fact Erkki is still tramping around on those same soles. The fame of them has spread over all the land and it has got so that now people stop Erkki on the highway to look at his wonderful boots soled with the Devil’s hide. Travelers from foreign countries are deeply interested when they hear about the boots and when they meet Erkki they question him closely.

“Tell us,” they beg him, “how did you get the Devil’s hide in the first place?”

Erkki always laughs and makes the same answer:

“I got it by not losing my temper!”

As for the Devil, he’s never again made a bargain like that with a Finn!

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