

A Story Of Seven Devils

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Frank R. Stockton (1834-1902)

The negro church which stood in the pine woods near the little village of Oxford Cross Roads, in one of the lower counties of Virginia, was presided over by an elderly individual, known to the community in general as Uncle Pete; but on Sundays the members of his congregation addressed him as Brudder Pete. He was an earnest and energetic man, and, although he could neither read nor write, he had for many years expounded the Scriptures to the satisfaction of his hearers. His memory was good, and those portions of the Bible, which from time to time he had heard read, were used by him, and frequently with powerful effect, in his sermons. His interpretations of the Scriptures were generally entirely original, and were made to suit the needs, or what he supposed to be the needs, of his congregation.

Whether as "Uncle Pete" in the garden and corn-field, or "Brudder Pete" in the church, he enjoyed the good opinion of everybody excepting one person, and that was his wife. She was a high-tempered and somewhat dissatisfied person, who had conceived the idea that her husband was in the habit of giving too much time to the church, and too little to the acquisition of corn-bread and pork. On a certain Saturday she gave him a most tremendous scolding, which so affected the spirits of the good man that it influenced his decision in regard to the selection of the subject for his sermon the next day.

His congregation was accustomed to being astonished, and rather liked it, but never before had their minds received such a shock as when the preacher announced the subject of his discourse. He did not take any particular text, for this was not his custom, but he boldly stated that the Bible declared that every woman in this world was possessed by seven devils; and the evils which this state of things had

brought upon the world, he showed forth with much warmth and feeling. Subject-matter, principally from his own experience, crowded in upon his mind, and he served it out to his audience hot and strong. If his deductions could have been proved to be correct, all women were creatures who, by reason of their sevenfold diabolic possession, were not capable of independent thought or action, and who should in tears and humility place themselves absolutely under the direction and authority of the other sex.

When he approached the conclusion of his sermon, Brother Peter closed with a bang the Bible, which, although he could not read a word of it, always lay open before him while he preached, and delivered the concluding exhortation of his sermon.

"Now, my dear brev'ren ob dis congregation," he said, "I want you to understan' dat dar's nuffin in dis yer sarmon wot you've jus' heerd ter make you think yousefs angels. By no means, brev'ren; you was all brung up by women, an' you've got ter lib wid' em, an' ef anythin' in dis yer worl' is ketchin', my dear brev'ren, it's habin' debbils, an' from wot I've seen ob some ob de men ob dis worl' I 'spect dey is persest ob 'bout all de debbils dey got room fur. But de Bible don' say nuffin p'intedly on de subjec' ob de number ob debbils in man, an' I 'spec' dose dat's got 'em--an' we ought ter feel pow'ful thankful, my dear brev'ren, dat de Bible don' say we all's got 'em--has 'em 'cordin to sarcumstances. But wid de women it's dif'rent; dey's got jus' sebin, an' bless my soul, brev'ren, I think dat's 'nuff.

"While I was a-turnin' ober in my min' de subjec' ob dis sarmon, dere come ter me a bit ob Scripter wot I heerd at a big preachin' an' baptizin' at Kyarter's Mills, 'bout ten year' ago. One ob de preachers was a-tellin' about ole mudder Ebe a-eatin' de apple, and says he: De sarpint fus' come along wid a red apple, an' says he: 'You gib dis yer to your husban', an' he think it so mighty good dat when he done eat it he gib you anything you ax him fur, ef you tell him whar de tree is.' Ebe, she took one bite, an' den she frew dat apple away. 'Wot you

mean, you triflin' sarpint,' says she, 'a fotchin' me dat apple wot ain't good fur nuffin but ter make cider wid?' Den de sarpint he go fotch her a yaller apple, an' she took one bite, an' den says she: 'Go 'long wid ye, you fool sarpint, wot you fotch me dat June apple wot ain't got no taste to it?' Den de sarpint he think she like sumpin' sharp, an' he fotch her a green apple. She takes one bite ob it, an' den she frows it at his head, an' sings out: 'Is you 'spectin' me to gib dat apple to yer Uncle Adam an' gib him de colic?' Den de debbil he fotch her a lady-apple, but she say she won't take no sich triflin' nubbins as dat to her husban', an' she took one bite ob it, an' frew it away. Den he go fotch her two udder kin' ob apples, one yaller wid red stripes, an' de udder one red on one side an' green on de udder--mighty good-lookin' apples, too--de kin' you git two dollars a bar'l fur at the store. But Ebe, she wouldn't hab neider ob 'em, an' when she done took one bite out ob each one, she frew it away. Den de ole debbil-sarpint, he scratch he head, an' he say to hese'f: 'Dis yer Ebe, she pow'ful 'ticklar 'bout her apples. Reckin I'll have ter wait till after fros', an' fotch her a real good one,' An' he done wait till after fros', and then he fotch her a Albemarle pippin, an' when she took one bite ob dat, she jus' go 'long an' eat it all up, core, seeds, an' all. 'Look h'yar, sarpint,' says she, 'hab you got anudder ob dem apples in your pocket?' An' den he tuk one out, an' gib it to her. "Cuse me,' says she, 'I's gwine ter look up Adam, an' ef he don' want ter know war de tree is wot dese apples grow on, you can hab him fur a corn-field han'.'

"An' now, my dear brev'ren," said Brother Peter, "while I was a-turnin' dis subjec' ober in my min', an' wonderin' how de women come ter hab jus' seben debbils apiece, I done reckerleck dat bit ob Scriptor wot I heerd at Kyarter's Mills, an' I reckon dat 'splains how de debbils got inter woman. De sarpint he done fotch mudder Ebe seben apples, an' ebery one she take a bite out of gib her a debbil."

As might have been expected, this sermon produced a great sensation, and made a deep impression on the congregation. As a rule, the men were tolerably well satisfied with it; and when the services were over

many of them made it the occasion of shy but very plainly pointed remarks to their female friends and relatives.

But the women did not like it at all. Some of them became angry, and talked very forcibly, and feelings of indignation soon spread among all the sisters of the church. If their minister had seen fit to stay at home and preach a sermon like this to his own wife (who, it may be remarked, was not present on this occasion), it would have been well enough, provided he had made no allusions to outsiders; but to come there and preach such things to them was entirely too much for their endurance. Each one of the women knew she had not seven devils, and only a few of them would admit of the possibility of any of the others being possessed by quite so many.

Their preacher's explanation of the manner in which every woman came to be possessed of just so many devils appeared to them of little importance. What they objected to was the fundamental doctrine of his sermon, which was based on his assertion that the Bible declared every woman had seven devils. They were not willing to believe that the Bible said any such thing. Some of them went so far as to state it was their opinion that Uncle Pete had got this fool notion from some of the lawyers at the court-house when he was on a jury a month or so before. It was quite noticeable that, although Sunday afternoon had scarcely begun, the majority of the women of the congregation called their minister Uncle Pete. This was very strong evidence of a sudden decline in his popularity.

Some of the more vigorous-minded women, not seeing their minister among the other people in the clearing in front of the log church, went to look for him, but he was not to be found. His wife had ordered him to be home early, and soon after the congregation had been dismissed he departed by a short cut through the woods. That afternoon an irate committee, composed principally of women, but including also a few men who had expressed disbelief in the new doctrine, arrived at the cabin of their preacher, but found there only his wife, cross-grained

old Aunt Rebecca. She informed them that her husband was not at home.

"He's done 'gaged hisse'f," she said, "ter cut an' haul wood fur Kunnel Martin ober on Little Mount'n fur de whole ob nex' week. It's fourteen or thirteen mile' from h'yar, an' ef he'd started ter-morrer mawnm', he'd los' a'mos' a whole day. 'Sides dat, I done tole him dat ef he git dar ter-night he'd have his supper frowed in. Wot you all want wid him? Gwine to pay him fur preachin'?"

Any such intention as this was instantaneously denied, and Aunt Rebecca was informed of the subject upon which her visitors had come to have a very plain talk with her husband.

Strange to say, the announcement of the new and startling dogma had apparently no disturbing effect upon Aunt Rebecca. On the contrary, the old woman seemed rather to enjoy the news.

"Reckin he oughter know all 'bout dat," she said. "He's done had three wives, an' he ain't got rid o' dis one yit."

Judging from her chuckles and waggings of the head when she made this remark, it might be imagined that Aunt Rebecca was rather proud of the fact that her husband thought her capable of exhibiting a different kind of diabolism every day in the week.

The leader of the indignant church-members was Susan Henry; a mulatto woman of a very independent turn of mind. She prided herself that she never worked in anybody's house but her own, and this immunity from outside service gave her a certain pre-eminence among her sisters. Not only did Susan share the general resentment with which the startling statement of old Peter had been received, but she felt that its promulgation had affected her position in the community. If every woman was possessed by seven devils, then, in this respect, she was no better nor worse than any of the others; and at

this her proud heart rebelled. If the preacher had said some women had eight devils and others six, it would have been better. She might then have made a mental arrangement in regard to her relative position which would have somewhat consoled her. But now there was no chance for that. The words of the preacher had equally debased all women.

A meeting of the disaffected church-members was held the next night at Susan Henry's cabin, or rather in the little yard about it, for the house was not large enough to hold the people who attended it. The meeting was not regularly organized, but everybody said what he or she had to say, and the result was a great deal of clamor, and a general increase of indignation against Uncle Pete.

"Look h'yar!" cried Susan, at the end of some energetic remarks, "is dar enny pusson h'yar who kin count up figgers?"

Inquiries on the subject ran through the crowd, and in a few moments a black boy, about fourteen, was pushed forward as an expert in arithmetic.

"Now, you Jim," said Susan, "you's been, to school, an' you kin count up figgers. 'Cordin' ter de chu'ch books dar's forty-seben women b'longin' to our meetin', an' ef each one ob dem dar has got seben debbils in her, I jus' wants you ter tell me how many debbils come to chu'ch ebery clear Sunday ter hear dat ole Uncle Pete preach."

This view of the case created a sensation, and much interest was shown in the result of Jim's calculations, which were made by the aid of a back of an old letter and a piece of pencil furnished by Susan. The result was at last announced as three hundred and nineteen, which, although not precisely correct, was near enough to satisfy the company.

"Now, you jus' turn dat ober in you all's minds," said Susan. "More'n free hundred debbils in chu'ch ebery Sunday, an' we women fotchin 'em. Does anybody s'pose I's gwine ter b'lieve dat fool talk?"

A middle-aged man now lifted up his voice and said: "I's been thinkin' ober dis h'yar matter and I's 'cluded dat p'r'aps de words ob de preacher was used in a figgeratous form o' sense. P'r'aps de seben debbils meant chillun."

These remarks were received with no favor by the assemblage.

"Oh, you git out!" cried Susan. "Your ole woman's got seben chillun, shore 'nuf, an' I s'pec' dey's all debbils. But dem sent'ments don't apply ter all de udder women h'yar, 'tic'larly ter dem dar young uns wot ain't married yit."

This was good logic, but the feeling on the subject proved to be even stronger, for the mothers in the company became so angry at their children being considered devils that for a time there seemed to be danger of an Amazonian attack on the unfortunate speaker. This was averted, but a great deal of uproar now ensued, and it was the general feeling that something ought to be done to show the deep-seated resentment with which the horrible charge against the mothers and sisters of the congregation had been met. Many violent propositions were made, some of the younger men going so far as to offer to burn down the church. It was finally agreed, quite unanimously, that old Peter should be unceremoniously ousted from his place in the pulpit which he had filled so many years.

As the week passed on, some of the older men of the congregation who had friendly feelings toward their old companion and preacher talked the matter over among themselves, and afterward, with many of their fellow-members, succeeded at last in gaining the general consent that Uncle Pete should be allowed a chance to explain himself, and give his grounds and reasons for his astounding statement in regard to

womankind. If he could show biblical authority for this, of course nothing more could be said. But if he could not, then he must get down from the pulpit, and sit for the rest of his life on a back seat of the church. This proposition met with the more favor, because even those who were most indignant had an earnest curiosity to know what the old man would say for himself.

During all this time of angry discussion, good old Peter was quietly and calmly cutting and hauling wood on the Little Mountain. His mind was in a condition of great comfort and peace, for not only had he been able to rid himself, in his last sermon, of many of the hard thoughts concerning women that had been gathering themselves together for years, but his absence from home had given him a holiday from the harassments of Aunt Rebecca's tongue, so that no new notions of woman's culpability had risen within him. He had dismissed the subject altogether, and had been thinking over a sermon regarding baptism, which he thought he could make convincing to certain of the younger members of his congregation.

He arrived at home very late on Saturday night, and retired to his simple couch without knowing anything of the terrible storm which had been gathering through the week, and which was to burst upon him on the morrow. But the next morning, long before church time, he received warning enough of what was going to happen. Individuals and deputations gathered in and about his cabin--some to tell him all that had been said and done; some to inform him what was expected of him; some to stand about and look at him; some to scold; some to denounce; but, alas! not one to encourage; nor one to call him "Brudder Pete," that Sunday appellation dear to his ears. But the old man possessed a stubborn soul, not easily to be frightened.

"Wot I says in de pulpit," he remarked, "I'll 'splain in de pulpit, an' you all ud better git 'long to de chu'ch, an' when de time fur de sarvice come, I'll be dar."

This advice was not promptly acted upon, but in the course of half an hour nearly all the villagers and loungers had gone off to the church in the woods; and when Uncle Peter had put on his high black hat, somewhat battered, but still sufficiently clerical looking for that congregation, and had given something of a polish to his cowhide shoes, he betook himself by the accustomed path to the log building where he had so often held forth to his people. As soon as he entered the church he was formally instructed by a committee of the leading members that before he began to open the services, he must make it plain to the congregation that what he had said on the preceding Sunday about every woman being possessed by seven devils was Scripture truth, and not mere wicked nonsense out of his own brain. If he could not do that, they wanted no more praying or preaching from him.

Uncle Peter made no answer, but, ascending the little pulpit, he put his hat on the bench behind him where it was used to repose, took out his red cotton handkerchief and blew his nose in his accustomed way, and looked about him. The house was crowded. Even Aunt Rebecca was there.

After a deliberate survey of his audience, the preacher spoke: "Brev'eren an' sisters, I see afore me Brudder Bill Hines, who kin read de Bible, an' has got one. Ain't dat so, Brudder?"

Bill Hines having nodded and modestly grunted assent, the preacher continued. "An' dars' Ann' Priscilla's boy, Jake, who ain't a brudder yit, though he's plenty old 'nuf, min', I tell ye; an' he kin read de Bible, fus' rate, an' has read it ter me ober an' ober ag'in. Ain't dat so, Jake?"

Jake grinned, nodded, and hung his head, very uncomfortable at being thus publicly pointed out.

"An' dar's good ole Aun' Patty, who knows more Scripeter dan ennybuddy h'yar, havin' been taught by de little gals from Kunnel

Jasper's an' by dere mudders afore 'em. I reckon she know' de hull Bible straight frow, from de Garden of Eden to de New Jerus'lum. An' dar are udders h'yar who knows de Scriptures, some one part an' some anudder. Now I axes ebery one ob you all wot know de Scriptures ef he don' 'member how de Bible tells how our Lor' when he was on dis yearth cas' seben debbils out o' Mary Magdalum?"

A murmur of assent came from the congregation, Most of them remembered that.

"But did enny ob you ebber read, or hab read to you, dat he ebber cas' 'em out o' enny udder woman?"

Negative grunts and shakes of the head signified that nobody had ever heard of this.

"Well, den," said the preacher, gazing blandly around, "all de udder women got 'em yit."

A deep silence fell upon the assembly, and in a few moments an elderly member arose. "Brudder Pete," he said, "I reckon you mought as well gib out de hyme."