

The Master-Smith

by Sir George Webbe Dasent
from *Popular Tales from the Norse*

Once on a time, in the days when our Lord and St Peter used to wander on earth, they came to a smith's house. He had made a bargain with the Devil, that the fiend should have him after seven years, but during that time he was to be the master of all masters in his trade, and to this bargain both he and the Devil had signed their names. So he had stuck up in great letters over the door of his forge: *'Here dwells the Master over all Masters.'*

Now when our Lord passed by and saw that, he went in.

'Who are you?' he said to the Smith.

'Read what's written over the door', said the Smith; 'but maybe you can't read writing. If so, you must wait till some one comes to help you.'

Before our Lord had time to answer him, a man came with his horse, which he begged the Smith to shoe.

'Might I have leave to shoe it?' asked our Lord.

'You may try, if you like', said the Smith; 'you can't do it so badly that I shall not be able to make it right again.'

So our Lord went out and took one leg off the horse, and laid it in the furnace, and made the shoe red-hot; after that, he turned up the ends of the shoe, and filed down the heads of the nails, and clenched the points; and then he put back the leg safe and sound on the horse again. And when he was done with that leg, he took the other fore-leg and did the same with it; and when he was done with that, he took the hind-legs--first, the off, and then the near leg, and laid them in the furnace, making the shoes red-hot, turning up the ends; filing the heads of the nails, and clenching the points; and after all was done, putting the legs on the horse again. All the while, the Smith stood by and looked on.

'You're not so bad a smith after all', said he.

'Oh, you think so, do you?' said our Lord.

A little while after came the Smith's mother to the forge, and called him to come home and eat his dinner; she was an old, old woman with an ugly crook on her back, and wrinkles in her face, and it was as much as she could do to crawl along.

'Mark now, what you see', said our Lord.

Then he took the woman and laid her in the furnace, and smithied a lovely young maiden out of her.

'Well', said the Smith, 'I say now, as I said before, you are not such a bad smith after all. There it stands over my door. *Here dwells the Master over all Masters*; but for all that, I say right out, one learns as long as one lives'; and with that he walked off to his house and ate his dinner.

So after dinner, just after he had got back to his forge, a man came riding up to have his horse shod.

'It shall be done in the twinkling of an eye', said the Smith, 'for I have just learnt a new way to shoe; and a very good way it is when the days are short.'

So he began to cut and hack till he had got all the horse's legs off, for he said, I don't know why one should go pottering backwards and forwards--first, with one leg, and then with another.

Then he laid the legs in the furnace, just as he had seen our Lord lay them, and threw on a great heap of coal, and made his mates work the bellows bravely; but it went as one might suppose it would go. The legs were burnt to ashes, and the Smith had to pay for the horse.

Well, he didn't care much about that, but just then an old beggar-woman came along the road, and he thought to himself, 'better luck next time'; so he took the old dame and laid her in the furnace, and though she begged and prayed hard for her life, it was no good.

'You're so old, you don't know what is good for you', said the Smith; 'now you shall be a lovely young maiden in half no time, and for all that, I'll not charge you a penny for the job.'

But it went no better with the poor old woman than with the horse's legs.

'That was ill done, and I say it', said our Lord.

'Oh! for that matter', said the Smith, 'there's not many who'll ask after her, I'll be bound; but it's a shame of the Devil, if this is the way he holds to what is written up over the door.'

'If you might have three wishes from me', said our Lord, 'what would you wish for?'

'Only try me', said the Smith, 'and you'll soon know.'

So our Lord gave him three wishes.

'Well', said the Smith, 'first and foremost, I wish that any one whom I ask to climb up into the pear-tree that stands outside by the wall of my forge, may stay sitting there till I ask him to come down again. The second wish I wish is, that any one whom I ask to sit down in my easy chair which stands inside the workshop yonder, may stay sitting there till I ask him to get up. Last of all, I wish that any one whom I ask to creep into the steel purse which I have in my pocket, may stay in it till I give him leave to creep out again.'

'You have wished as a wicked man', said St Peter; 'first and foremost, you should have wished for God's grace and goodwill.'

'I durstn't look so high as that', said the Smith; and after that our Lord and St Peter bade him 'good-bye', and went on their way.

Well, the years went on and on, and when the time was up, the Devil came to fetch the Smith, as it was written in their bargain.

'Are you ready?' he said, as he stuck his nose in at the door of the forge.

'Oh', said the Smith, 'I must just hammer the head of this tenpenny nail first; meantime, you can just climb up into the pear-tree, and pluck yourself a pear to gnaw at; you must be, both hungry and thirsty after your journey.'

So the Devil thanked him for his kind offer, and climbed up into the pear-tree.

'Very good', said the Smith; 'but now, on thinking the matter over, I find I shall never be able to have done hammering the head of this nail till four years are out at least, this iron is so plaguey hard; down you can't come in all that time, but may sit up there and rest your bones.'

When the Devil heard this, he begged and prayed till his voice was as thin as a silver penny that he might have leave to come down; but there was no help for it. There he was, and there he must stay. At last he had to give his word of honour not to come again till the four years were out, which the Smith had spoken of, and then the Smith said, 'Very well, now you may come down.'

So when the time was up, the Devil came again to fetch the Smith.

'You're ready now, of course', said he; 'you've had time enough to hammer the head of that nail, I should think.'

'Yes, the head is right enough now', said the Smith; 'but still you have come a little tiny bit too soon, for I haven't quite done sharpening the point; such plaguey hard iron I never hammered in all my born days. So while I work at the point, you may just as well sit down in my easy chair and rest yourself; I'll be bound you're weary after coming so far.'

'Thank you kindly', said the Devil, and down he plumped into the easy chair; but just as he had made himself comfortable, the Smith said, on second thoughts, he found he couldn't get the point sharp till four years were out. First of all, the Devil begged so prettily to be let out of the chair, and afterwards, waxing wroth, he began to threaten and scold; but the Smith kept on, all the while excusing himself, and saying it was all the iron's fault, it was so plaguy hard, and telling the Devil he was not so badly off to have to sit quietly in an easy chair, and that he would let him out to the minute when the four years were over. Well, at last there was no help for it, and the Devil had to give

his word of honour not to fetch the Smith till the four years were out; and then the Smith said:

'Well now, you may get up and be off about your business', and away went the Devil as fast as he could lay legs to the ground.

When the four years were over, the Devil came again to fetch the Smith, and he called out, as he stuck his nose in at the door of the forge:

'Now, I know you must be ready.'

'Ready, aye, ready', answered the Smith; 'we can go now as soon as you please; but hark ye, there is one thing I have stood here and thought, and thought, I would ask you to tell me. Is it true what people say, that the Devil can make himself as small as he pleases?'

'God knows, it is the very truth', said the Devil.

'Oh!' said the Smith; 'it *is* true, is it? then I wish you would just be so good as to creep into this steel purse of mine, and see whether it is sound at the bottom, for to tell you the truth, I'm afraid my travelling money will drop out.'

'With all my heart', said the Devil, who made himself small in a trice, and crept into the purse; but he was scarce in when the Smith snapped to the clasp.

'Yes', called out the Devil inside the purse; 'it's right and tight everywhere.'

'Very good', said the Smith; 'I'm glad to hear you say so, but "more haste the worse speed", says the old saw, and "forewarned is forearmed", says another; so I'll just weld these links a little together, just for safety's sake'; and with that he laid the purse in the furnace, and made it red-hot.

'AU! AU!' screamed the Devil, 'are you mad? don't you know I'm inside the purse?'

'Yes, I do!' said the Smith; 'but I can't help you, for another old saw says, "one must strike while the iron is hot"'; and as he said this, he

took up his sledge-hammer, laid the purse on the anvil, and let fly at it as hard as he could.

'AU! AU! AU!' bellowed the Devil, inside the purse. 'Dear friend, do let me out, and I'll never come near you again.'

'Very well!' said the Smith; 'now, I think, the links are pretty well welded, and you may come out'; so he unclasped the purse, and away went the Devil in such a hurry that he didn't once look behind him.

Now, some time after, it came across the Smith's mind that he had done a silly thing in making the Devil his enemy, for, he said to himself:

'If, as is like enough, they won't have me in the kingdom of Heaven, I shall be in danger of being houseless, since I've fallen out with him who rules over Hell.'

So he made up his mind it would be best to try to get either into Hell or Heaven, and to try at once, rather than to put it off any longer, so that he might know how things really stood. Then he threw his sledge-hammer over his shoulder and set off; and when he had gone a good bit of the way, he came to a place where two roads met, and where the path to the kingdom of Heaven parts from the path that leads to Hell, and here he overtook a tailor, who was pelting along with his goose in his hand.

'Good day', said the Smith; 'whither are you off to?'

'To the kingdom of Heaven', said the Tailor, 'if I can only get into it'-- 'but whither are you going yourself?'

'Oh, our ways don't run together', said the Smith; 'for I have made up my mind to try first in Hell, as the Devil and I know something of one another, from old times.'

So they bade one another 'Good-bye', and each went his way; but the Smith was a stout, strong man, and got over the ground far faster than the tailor, and so it wasn't long before he stood at the gates of Hell. Then he called the watch, and bade him go and tell the Devil there was some one outside who wished to speak a word with him.

'Go out', said the Devil to the watch, 'and ask him who he is?' So that when the watch came and told him that, the Smith answered:

'Go and greet the Devil in my name, and say it is the Smith who owns the purse he wots of; and beg him prettily to let me in at once, for I worked at my forge till noon, and I have had a long walk since.'

But when the Devil heard who it was, he charged the watch to go back and lock up all the nine locks on the gates of Hell.

'And, besides', he said, 'you may as well put on a padlock, for if he only once gets in, he'll turn Hell topsy-turvy!'

'Well!' said the Smith to himself, when he saw them busy bolting up the gates, 'there's no lodging to be got here, that's plain; so I may as well try my luck in the kingdom of Heaven'; and with that he turned round and went back till he reached the cross-roads, and then he went along the path the tailor had taken. And now, as he was cross at having gone backwards and forwards so far for no good, he strode along with all his might, and reached the gate of Heaven just as St Peter was opening it a very little, just enough to let the half-starved tailor slip in. The Smith was still six or seven strides off the gate, so he thought to himself, 'Now there's no time to be lost'; and, grasping his sledge-hammer, he hurled it into the opening of the door just as the tailor slunk in; and if the Smith didn't get in then, when the door was ajar, why I don't know what has become of him.