

## THE POOR SHOEMAKER AND THE MISERLY MERCHANT

Once upon a time there was a widowed shoemaker who had eight young children. There came a time when the father had very little business and the family became very poor. The little ones often had nothing to eat and cried with hunger. They cried at night when they went to bed with empty stomachs. They cried in the morning when they woke up hungry. And, they cried all day when there was nothing to eat. The poor shoemaker tried everything he could but there was no food and he had no money to buy food. There was only one thing he had not done — to ask his neighbour for help.

His neighbour was a rich merchant who was not known for his generosity or kindness. In fact, he was just the opposite. He was a greedy, selfish miser who loved the things money could buy — for himself. But, with no other choice, the shoemaker went to him and asked him to lend him a little money. He only needed a few pennies to buy bread to keep his children alive. But the miserly merchant sent him away, saying that feeding the shoemaker's children was not *his* problem, and that he would be fool to give away money with no hope of it being given back.

The poor shoemaker saw that it was hopeless and, without money or food, returned to his family. When he saw his hungry children, waiting hopefully for him to return with at least a little bread, and the tears in their eyes, he too started cry. There really was no more food, and no hope.

After two days without eating anything, the shoemaker decided to ask his neighbour again. He thought that, maybe, when he saw the children's plight and the father's tears, God would soften his heart. He would ask him on bended knee for *anything* which could help. This time the neighbour answered "Yes, I will give you *something*, a rope to hang yourself. Then you can put yourself out of your misery and won't bother anybody else again." Then he really did give the poor shoemaker a rope, which he took.

As the shoemaker held the rope in his hands, he thought about his poor children who were starving. He couldn't go back to them without food. If he couldn't provide for them, then maybe it would be better for everybody if he was dead. But, somewhere inside, he was still ashamed, and didn't want anybody to see him do it. Soon he found himself alone, deep inside the forest, standing under a tall tree with strong branches. As he climbed the tree to fix his rope, the thought came to him that he would like to see the world again, just one more time, before he died. So, he continued climbing until he could climb no further. It was the tallest tree in in the forest, and he could see far and wide. The world was beautiful, and he didn't really want to leave it just yet.

Not too far away, hidden a little deeper in the woods, he saw a magnificent house. The house was bigger and more splendid than any he had ever seen before, and he knew that he had to see it from nearer by before he died. Like a

squirrel he scampered down through the branches, dropped the rope at the foot of the trunk, and set off in the direction of the house. There was still hope that there, in such a magnificent house, he could find help for his family. If not, he could still kill himself later.

When he arrived at the house the door was open, so he went inside. He came to a large dining hall with a great table set with 12 places. The table was heavily laden with many platters of rich dishes, with wonderful aromas. But, there was nobody to be found in the whole house, and nobody came. After a while, the hungry shoemaker could stand it no longer, and he tried the food and wine. He tasted a little of everything, and soon his hunger was satisfied.

Then, he heard voices. Somebody was coming, and he had stolen their food. Frightened, he looked for a place to hide, and found one inside the huge unlit stove. There, crouching in the dark as quiet as a mouse, he could see and hear everything.

Twelve fine gentlemen came into the dining hall and took their places at the table. It wasn't long before each began to ask questions —

“Who has dirtied my spoon?”

“Who's eaten my soup?”

“Who's been eating my roast?”

“Who has blunted my knife?”

“Who has cut my bread?”

“Who's drunk my wine?”

And, so it went on until the first fine gentleman asked the others if they had any news. The second fine gentleman said that he had nothing, as did the third, and the fourth, until the last answered. He had news from the capital. The king's daughter was very ill and in great pain because she had injured her right foot. None of the doctors was able to help her, and without treatment she would soon die.

Eleven fine gentlemen all asked the twelfth “Is there nobody who can help? Don't we know how to help her?”.

“Yes, I do.” Replied the twelfth fine gentleman. “Behind a great rock in the white cliffs near the city lives a horrible dragon. Every night at midnight, the rock moves aside and the creature comes out of its cave. The fat from this worm is a salve, which will cure the princess in eight days. All somebody has to do is kill the dragon, take its fat, and smear it on her right foot.”

At the conclusion of this tale, the twelve fine gentlemen rose from the table and left the room. Then, when everything was quiet, the poor shoemaker slipped out of his hiding place, and out of the house. He had decided that he would be the one to cure the princess. If there was a reward, he would be able to buy food for his children.

A little way from the house, he came to a well-made wide road, which led him directly to the city and the king's palace. At the palace he was taken to the king, and told him that he could cure his daughter, but he needed the help of six strong men. Just that moment, the princess again cried out loudly in pain and the king agreed immediately. He placed his six strongest men under the shoemaker's command.

The shoemaker then led his troop to the white cliffs near the city, where they found the great rock. There, they waited until midnight when the rock started to move. It rolled aside, and a horrible dragon slithered out from behind it. The shoemaker and the six men all attacked the creature at once with axes and clubs. The shoemaker then cut the fat out of the dragon's lifeless body, and they returned to the palace. He then smeared the princess's right foot with as much of the fat as he could, and they waited. Every day, the princess was a little better, until after eight days her leg was completely healed, and looked as pink and healthy as a fresh apple.

Her father, the kind old king, was very happy and took the poor shoemaker to the palace vault. he showed him all the gold, jewels and wonderful treasures, and said "Take as much gold as you want." The shoemaker, thinking about his eight hungry children, didn't need telling twice. He thanked the king and filled all his pockets with gold coins until he couldn't carry any more. But the king wasn't happy with how much the shoemaker took.

It wasn't enough!

The king had a large sack filled with gold which he gave to the shoemaker. It was so heavy that he couldn't carry it, and he had to borrow a donkey to carry it home. When he arrived home, the shoemaker found all of his children still alive. A kind neighbour — not the miserly merchant — had watched over them and given them a little food while he was away. Now that he was a rich man, they lived with him happily ever after.

But it was not so with his neighbour, the miserly merchant. He was surprised, and not a little jealous, when he saw how rich the shoemaker had become and how well he lived. So, he went to him and asked him how he had become so rich. The shoemaker wasn't a man who kept secrets, and happily told him: how he had found the magnificent house; how he had heard about the princess; how he killed the dragon, and how the king had rewarded him.

The greedy neighbour then thought to himself "If I do the same then I can also become even richer". Like his neighbour, except for thinking about killing himself, he went into the forest and climbed the tallest tree. From the top of the

tree he saw the magnificent house, climbed down. and hurried towards it. He found the door open and went inside. He came to a large dining hall with a great table set with 12 places. The table was heavily laden with many platters of rich dishes, with wonderful aromas. He tasted something of everything until he could eat no more. Then, he heard voices and hid inside the huge unlit stove.

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At the conclusion of this tale, the twelve fine gentlemen rose from the table and drew their swords. Then they thrust them, again and again, into the stove until the miserly merchant was no more.