

What the Devil Cannot Bear

A Tale by Herbert Hahn

Abridged Version for Michaelmas 2021 in Beaver Run

Part I

Once upon a time, a King lost his way in a great forest. After he had wandered and traipsed around for quite a bit and did not find his way, he became devilish vexed and this expression burst from his lips: "Oh, the Devil take it!" And right away the Devil stood before him. "You have lost your way? I will guide you." And sure enough, he led him out of the forest. Then, however, the Devil said, "I was quite happy to help you, but now I want something in return. Quite soon I shall come along and fetch the crown jewels. Good work deserves good pay!"

Before the King even reached the town gates, he had found the rest of his company again. The noblemen made a big fuss about having lost the King, but the King was not in the mood to speak much about it. He only told them how he had at last got out of the forest. He did not say a word of the Devil. When he got home, however, he told the Queen the whole story of his adventure. "I'm not sure if the Devil really meant it seriously," he said in the end. "Oh yes, surely!" responded his wife. "The Devil is always serious. I have known that for a long time."

Well, who can know what might happen? In any case, they decided to put the crown jewels under special protection and security. The Queen said, "I don't trust the guards. Just when we need to really depend on them for once, they'll fall asleep for sure. We had better look after the jewels ourselves. We will take them into our bedroom. There they will be well looked after both when we are waking and when we are sleeping." The King was pleased with this excellent advice, which was right away put into deed.

During the following nights, the King and Queen took turns staying up to watch, but the Devil did not turn up. On the third evening, the Queen said to her husband: "All the business affairs of the kingdom give you enough to worry about. I cannot stand by and watch you give up night after night's sleep, all because of such a silly devil. Tonight you just go to sleep peacefully. I'll soon get an idea, so that he will not lack a suitable reception, if he decides to appear." The King was so happy at this reassurance, that before he had time to ask what the idea might be, he was already asleep and snoring royally.

The Queen used guile: she took the little golden bed in which her youngest daughter, who was not yet three years old, lay peacefully asleep, pushed it out of the room, and put it between the inner and outer doors of the royal bed chamber. Now this was just the night in which the Devil wanted to show how serious he was about this business. Under cover of darkness he slipped into the town, stole through the main entrance of the King's palace, and went past the two guards at the inner door—one of whom had just put his spear aside to yawn aloud and rub the sleep from his eyes, while the other had just at that moment turned away as he suddenly was overcome by a sneezing fit. The Devil made a face and hurried on with soundless steps up the stairs. He sniffed and sniffed.

"Aha! In the bedchamber!" And his claws were already itching, as he now sneaked towards the chamber. Very quietly he opened the outer door, but Oh! how great was his shock when he saw the little child lying there. He cursed his grandfather and all his other ancestors. What to do? When in need the Devil becomes stupid. He just cannot believe that such a silly trick is meant to keep him off. He hears the King snoring, and the jewels—those lovely jewels—are only one jump away! He looks and stares and grinds his teeth and glowers; why doesn't someone come and take the child away? But as he bends forward the little one suddenly smiles in a dream. When angels smile, the Devil suffers terrible pain. The poor devil was terribly hurting. He pulled in his tail and away he was, away past the sentries, away beyond the town.

An hour after midnight one of the two sentries, who had meanwhile fallen asleep, awoke and said to his companion who had had the sneezes, "Look you, I'm thinking it's smelling of Sulphur here." The other replied, "You're always so quick to smell gunpowder, old chap."

The following morning was particularly sunny and lovely, and the youngest princess laughed brightly when she awoke. Then the Queen said to the King: "I know what I know! The Devil has certainly been here last night. Now I tell you, he won't come back again so soon." Thereupon she told the King of her trick. The King praised her highly and said, "Believe me, even if you had not said anything, last night I certainly felt it. I dreamt that I was lost in the wood again, and that the Devil had come. Then it seemed to me as if he were standing here at my bedside, staring at me out of the darkness and calling to me: *Give me the jewels! Give me the jewels!* How glad I am that we are now rid of him." "Hold on," said the Queen, "we won't be rid of him quite so quickly. It is a law among the Spirits, for the good as well as the bad ones, that they must come at least three times." "But we cannot let our little daughter sleep outside the door, night after night!" said the King. "Oh, that will not be necessary," responded the Queen. "The

devil is not that stupid that he would come twice at the same time. You may be sure that he will not pay us a visit during the night so long as we are at home.” “Yes, but,” said the King, “then we will have to keep guard from dawn to dusk.” The Queen smiled and spoke: “Just leave it to me.”

Part II

It seemed that the Devil had got the horrors pretty thoroughly, for quite a few weeks passed by before he was able to decide on another visit. “In the night,” said he, “there seem to be far too many of these ridiculous creatures about, the good spirits and sprites. Daytime is becoming our realm more and more. So, in the name of my great-grandfather I will try in the morning, in broad daylight.” No sooner thought than done.

On that morning there were a number of shepherds on the road driving their flocks to town. Now the Devil is a master of transformation. He had hardly seen those shepherds when the thought crossed his mind: *That would be fun for a change – I also want to be an honest shepherd for once. And besides, this way I will get a lot closer to the town without being noticed.* And before the shepherds rightly realized it, there stood at the wayside a proper fellow shepherd with a crooked staff, wishing them a right good morning and asking if he might join them. That was alright with the shepherds, they noticed nothing wrong.

But that now is a sign that we should not be too proud of our wits: animals namely sense all sorts of mischief much better than humans. And so it happened that, hardly had he gone a hundred paces with the herd, before the sheep suddenly became restless and started jumping about, butting each other, and rubbing and itching as if a plague of a hundred thousand ticks had descended on them. And the dogs yapped and ran among the sheep, and the shepherds hit out with their staffs, and did not know what was the matter. And when the Devil saw what sort of game he had begun he set to with a will. He used his power of changing shape, one moment he was a dog, then a sheep, now in one of the shepherds then in another, cursing and swearing so that the trees at the wayside swayed in the blast. Then the shepherds became furiously angry with one another and took their staffs and began to yell at each other and fight wildly; and the dogs yapped and barked, and the sheep bleated. It really was a devilish noise. However, just during the biggest chaos the Devil slipped away and made himself scarce, laughing wildly. When the shepherds had hit each other hard enough to raise bumps and bruises, they began to come to their senses a little, looked up and saw that the fellow who had just joined them was not there any longer. Then they looked around a bit dazed and confused, laughed, and suspected

that some sort of evil magic had made a sport of them. For if a shepherd is fleeced more than his own sheep are, life has mostly not followed the divine order.

But the Devil was already well on his way. Then he saw a most learned gentleman proceeding along the road. Indeed, it was quite a famous professor who was on his way to town with a very special letter that he had written. He thought himself very smart and thought that the letter would bring him fame and money. Immediately the Devil became a traveling student and came with a solemn measured tread to meet his master. He behaved as though he were a foreign traveler journeying through all the kingdoms in order to learn about the wisdom of the world. He then asked the learned man who carried the letter what his name was. On hearing the name, he acted quite astonished and delighted, and exclaimed multiple times, "Oh really, really do I find at last that notable man of whom I have heard tell in three kingdoms already, of whom everyone says he knows ten times as many things as contained in any book!"

The professor—who must have gotten up a little too early—felt this speech flow into his ears most nobly, and as he was tempted to set before the studious stranger a sample of the highest earthly wisdom he said, "Truly, it was a fortunate hour that led you across my path. Look here, if it pleases you, I can show you a letter containing my latest discoveries." And he led the Devil aside a little towards the forest's edge where they sat down beneath a tall tree. Then the learned gentleman opened his letter, and the Devil looked over his shoulder and listened with apparent awe to the learned dissertation. Then just as the gentleman tapped the page three times on a particularly important part, suddenly—and who would believe the shock—a quite thick, thumbprint-sized inkblot suddenly appeared on the beautiful sheet of paper. The man looked and stared, "But, but... where did this ink come from?"

"Whatever do you mean? By my life, that's no ink. It is but a raindrop from yesterday evening that was still hanging high up on the tree. Look, there comes another one." But there came three of them. And as the astonished lawyer looked up at the tree whence the strange raindrops came, there came a further drop as big as a pigeon's egg and caught him smack on the nose. And immediately there followed a downpour, as it does in proper bad weather. Therewith, all the wonderful scholarship written upon the page was clean washed away. With the words, "Dear me, I've never seen such a fine rain shower, even in France!" the Devil had already disappeared.

Part III

When the Devil was already quite close to the town gate he saw that a troop of castle guards were just about to march into town. In a wink he took on the shape of a soldier and mingled with that fine mob. As is proper, he marched in step, left right, left right, joining the rows of soldiers as if he had done nothing else all the days of his life. Now the castle guards of this kingdom were just as nice as those of any other kingdom. That is to say they were in the habit of arguing and swearing so terribly that the sparrows fell dead from the sky. Amongst these castle guards there was one who was an exceptional master of this ancient military art. Around him something usually happened that often accompanies sneezing or yawning; he needed but to perform a little and a hundred joined in heartily. Now on that particular morning as the guards were marching through the streets something very strange happened. Folks ran to open their windows and looked out, listening and listening: never in all their days had the guards marched so peacefully through the streets; yes, and there were those among them who cast their eyes down as shyly as young servant maids. You might have taken it for a procession of churchgoers. Unused to such quiet and piety, some of the older comrades began to have a hollow feeling in the stomach. They looked around and about, wondering what was up. At last they noticed that the guard who was usually the most trouble had not cursed a single solitary time that morning. Instead, he marched on with eyes becoming rounder and rounder. At last he sighed deeply three times and said, "I don't know why, but I feel in such a festive mood today."

Meanwhile, the Devil had been having games of mock and sport. And so, strewing a little sand in all of their eyes, he led those pious guards away from the royal guardhouse to a kind of church. There was no weathervane on the spire or a cross. The Devil's church is the inn where many travelers go to eat and drink and spend the night. Travelers had a saying at that time: "Travel at least in twos, but sleep with hundreds." By that they did not mean other people, necessarily, but the many fleas that they would often find in their beds, especially if the straw sacks have not been properly shaken out. Now it so happened that just when the company of castle guards misled by the Devil arrived in front of the inn, the servants were cleaning out all the guestrooms and shaking out all the straw bedding. Then the Devil dropped his spear and in one great leap vaulted away over their heads. Now he is the Lord of the Fleas. And hardly had he bounded off with his bold jump, when a hundred thousand fleas descended on them from out of the straw beds that the servants were shaking out. When the guards went back through the town later that day they made up for what they had missed in the early morning, so that people went about their work with an easy mind.

At last the Devil came before the palace. For several days now, the Queen had already been giving both her small sons beautiful gold coins and encouraged them to play with them everywhere in front of the palace and the garden. This advice had been given her in a dream. Now when the Devil came to the gates, he saw the boys already from afar, playing with the coins in such a way that they threw them at the wall and watched how far they jumped back. The sight of it went straight into his limbs and he also became a small boy and joined in the children's games. The lads had no suspicion and allowed the stranger—who was nice and properly dressed, by the way—to play with them. The game went so that when one lad had thrown and his coin bounced back over all the others, the ones on the ground belonged to him. The Devil was full of greed. He himself threw pretty poorly, for the Devil can but do what he can. He is a bit slow on the uptake when learning new things. But it gave him particular pleasure slyly to support the older boy with all his devil's strength, so that he won more and more and the face of the smaller boy became longer and longer until the tears were not far away. Just then the bigger boy's coin sprang back over his little brother's last coin and he pocketed ten lovely chinking coins. The devil, whom the little one had lent five coins, made no move to hand back even just one coin. Thereupon the elder brother stuck his hand into his pocket and fished out fifteen new ones: "Here, you can have them all again!"

The Devil was dumbfounded. Never had he seen anything like it, someone winning and then depriving himself of his gains and even giving up more than that. As he is quite unable to understand this sort of game, or indeed any kind of a good game, he became so angry, that his face became redder and redder, and in spite of all his skill at disguise, his devil's mask peeped out of his disguised boy face.

The children cried out: "The Devil! The Devil!" The tramp of guards was heard. The devil reckoned he still knew these footsteps too well. It might well be that the troop of guards that he had so pleasantly led astray had meanwhile arrived at the royal guardhouse. So, he picked up his heels and ran. He swept through the main street but did not notice at all that one of the guards, who knew no better way of drowning fleas than by ordering brandy in the tavern, just then came stumbling drunk out of the inn. It was the same one who had felt so strangely festive that morning. And what bad luck the poor devil had, for in chasing along he ran so hard into the man that they both landed on the ground after bumping into each other right on their noses. Now the man had by no manner of means caught up with what he had missed that morning. And when he saw the wry-mouthed fellow, who only grinned at him without properly apologizing, our guard was overtaken by a truly devilish fury. And all the swear words that he had bitten back

now poured out with such gusto in the language and gestures of castle guards that the devil lay abed for three weeks, all black and blue; they say not even his great-grandmother really knew what to do for him.

Part IV

The King and Queen now had leisure to wait. For a long time, nothing more was heard or seen of the Devil. Had not the Queen insisted that he was certain to come a third time, the King would have thought the matter over and done with. After some weeks it happened that the King and Queen were requested to attend a wedding that was to be celebrated with great pomp in the neighboring kingdom. As all royalty from far and wide were invited, the King could not very well decline the invitation. But one of his first thoughts was, "What about the crown jewels?" and voiced his concern to the Queen. Once again she said, "Just leave it to me. We shall leave the jewels behind in our bedchamber, and you will see that we shall find everything all unharmed when we return."

"You seem very certain, by my faith," exclaimed the King. "If you make it true, I shall look up to you the rest of my life. If not, well then, the jewels..." and he did not finish the sentence. But the Queen just gave superior smile.

On the day before their departure she asked for the key of the old treasure chamber. She had an ancient golden lyre carried up, a heritage from bygone times that had not been played for over a hundred years. It was carried into the royal bedchamber. In the meantime, the Queen had had a goldsmith make gold wire that was so fine that you could hardly see it with the naked eye. When the King saw the harp, he shook his head at these strange goings-on. His wife, however, did not mention the wire, but only said that she thought they could safely leave; she would only ask his leave to oversee the locking of the doors herself. No sooner had the King left the room than the Queen took the fine wire and attached each piece of the precious crown jewels to one of the golden strings of the lyre. She strung the strings fine and taut. Then she did what she had promised the King and oversaw that the servants locked up properly—not that she had much faith in the measure herself. As the royal carriage rolled away from the palace, the King kept on looking out of the back window. The Queen inquired: "Why do you keep looking so, my dear husband?" He answered: "I am just taking leave of my beautiful crown jewels," and sighed deeply.

Now you must know that the Devil has a very keen nose; he will smell immediately when something is 'off', be it on this our Earth or even further. No sooner did he notice that the

kingdom was without its King and that the royal couple had left town than he became very cheerful.

“Now I have won the game,” he said, and no longer took any special care. As a vagabond he sauntered into the town, and wandered through the streets. Towards evening he slipped like a shadow unnoticed into the great palace yard and from there into the inner court, onto which the windows of the royal bedchamber opened. As fresh air is halfway to healthy life, the Queen had left open a small window at the top of one of the big windows. The Devil perceived this with such delight that he hopped twice his own height on one leg. “Ow! Ow!” he yelped when he came down to earth again, because he had landed on the leg on which he already limped. Thus, he realized that if his journey was to proceed upwards, the present guise would present all sorts of dangers. In a wink he turned into a raven, and croaked evilly, as though he already had his prey in his claws, and flew in at the bedchamber window. But when he saw the jewels gleaming and glinting, he could no longer bear the raven’s form. He did not think he could hold enough in his claws, and as he was prepared to take his departure in whatever way best suited him, he turned back into his own shape. And now for the jewels. First of all, the scepter, which was ornamented with two diamond rosettes. He felt and groped in the darkness. Yes, now he had it!

Oh, how the poor devil jumped in shock! What sang there in the middle of the night? A bell-clear tone sounded, and when in spite of it he grabbed the golden orb, woe! How his limbs cramped! A second tone sounded like the song of angels. Confounded, confused, dismayed, appalled, and pained from nose to tail, the devil seized hold of one piece after another, but as the harp-tones rang out, terrible pains shot through his limbs. He had to dance and dance so that he would have wept had he but had tears. The Devil can stand a great deal, but pure music is poison. And as he thus danced and whirled, ever faster and faster, suddenly the fury and the pain became so great that with a great shout of, “Let me go! Let me go!” he suddenly hit the ceiling, made a mighty hole in the roof with his head, and flew in a great arc through the air to land with his nose hitting the door of the house of hell.

“Hell’s bells, who is there knocking so impatiently?” called out one of the Devil’s grandfathers, who was ending his days doing duty as a porter. “Oh, I’ve got such a headache,” wailed the Devil. “If only you knew how bad my headache is! I feel so ill, so very ill...”

The King and Queen returned home. Already throughout the whole homeward journey the King had not spoken a single word anymore. Hardly had he laid aside his cloak than he was

hastening upstairs, so that the Queen was hardly able to keep up with him. Oh good! The locks were untouched. Had his wife really been right? When the door was opened the King stretched out his head and the Queen stretched too, as if she had eyes at the end of her nose. Huh! It didn't look exactly pretty in there. Somehow the jewels had come into great disorder. But they were all there, every single piece, all of them.

"There you are, you see," cried the Queen, clapping her hands as she danced up and down. "They are all there, all of them, all!" But the King just stood and looked and looked upwards. "My dear husband," said the Queen, "that is right. Just look up for the rest of your life. But I am not all that tall, the way you are standing and looking. Joy and relief must have disturbed your sense of proportion!" Splash! Suddenly, from above there came a big rain drop through the roof and fell on the Queen's forehead. Then she looked up and saw that her husband had not been looking at her, but at the great gaping hole up above. "I do know," said the King, "that you are a truly wise woman, but for being undisturbed this appears a little draughty. Now I am heartily grateful to the good devil that he departed in a proper fashion so that I may better look you straight in the eyes, but for the rest of our lives we had better not forget that all that is good comes to us from above."