

Old John And The Devil

(An American Folktale)

This folktale¹⁾ comes from the South eastern United States. It takes place in the days before automobiles when everyone used horses. A blacksmith— a man who makes horseshoes and other items from metal— was at that time quite an important part of the community. Because every one needed horseshoes and pots and pans and metal tools and things like nails, which the blacksmith made, the black smith shop also became a community gathering place where neighbor met neighbor.

Once there was a blacksmith everyone called Old John. He was the only blacksmith for miles a round and since he did very good work, his shop was frequently crowded with neighbors and old friends and other shopkeepers from the village. Old John himself, however, was not a friendly person. In fact, he was considered a terrible grouch, a very mean-spirited and temperamental²⁾ person. He was always complaining about people borrowing his tools, and sitting in his rocking chair to pass the time away in idle chatter, and tearing branches off his forsythia bush to use as whips for their horses. People generally tolerated Old John because they had to and because he was a good workman. Given that he was comparatively well off and an important member of the community, no one could understand why he was so mean.

One day when John was not very busy, a figure in a long, white robe appeared beside him as he clanged away making tools.

“Old John,” the figure said. “I have come to give you a chance to redeem yourself and save your soul. ”

Old John kept right on hammering. “You have, have you?” he said with a grin. “And who says I need redeeming³⁾ anyway?”

“Everyone knows,” the figure said, “you are a person of no generosity⁴⁾ and a very mean spirit. ”

“Is that right? ” Old John said, lifting his hammer in his visitor’s face and giving it a shake. “And just what it is you propose to do about it? ”

“I am authorized,” the figure said, “to grant you three wishes. ”

“Well, I am authorized,” Old John said, “to tell you I don’ t believe a word of it, and if you don’t haul your behind out of here and quit bothering me with all this work to do, I’ll put you out myself. ”

“I insist I am quite serious about this,” the figure said, “and furthermore you had best consider carefully what you wish for as your chances for going to heaven depend upon it. “

Old John just laughed. “Why I figure my chances of going to heaven are just as good as anybody’s,” he said. “I don’ t do anything but work, eat and sleep. And kick the dogs when they get under my feet. And chase away these loafers⁵⁾ that are always hanging around here. What’s wrong with that? ”

The figure just shook its misty head. “What are your three wishes, Old John? I don’t have much time to spend with you. ”

Old John wiped his beard with the back of his hand. “OK, ” he said. “I’ll play along with you. My first wish is this. People are always coming in here borrowing my hammer, you know, to fix a cart wheel or something. Just when I need it, I can’t find it and have to go looking for it. Now what I wish is that anyone who tries to borrow my hammer will get stuck fast right to it and that hammer will pound them around until I say, ‘Hammer, let go.’ That should stop people from borrowing my hammer all right. ” “

If that is what you wish for, that shall be granted, “the figure said, its voice sad.

“Second, ” Old John said. “I’m tired to death of people sitting in my rocking chair in the yard there. When I get tired and want to sit down with a pitcher of water, I’m always finding some lout with a pipe and his legs crossed rocking and chatting like he never did a lick of work in his life. Now I want that rocking chair to grab hold of people who sit in it and rock and spin them around and bounce them silly, until I say ‘Rocking chair, stop.’ And that will take care of that little problem.”

“You are wasting your chances for salvation⁶⁾, Old John, ” the figure said, “but if that is what you wish, so be it. What is your last wish? You have one last chance to wish for something good. Please consider your answer. ”

“I don’t need to consider it half a second, ” Old John said. “I know exactly what I want. You see that forsythia⁷⁾ bush beside the the door? Well, people are always tearing branches off that bush to use as whips for their horses. From now on when anyone tries to break a branch off that bush, I want that bush to grab them and haul them inside and whip them until they holler, and not let go or stop whipping until I say ‘Bush, stop. ’ ”

The figure shook its head in despair. “Your wishes are granted. ” Then it disappeared.

In the days that followed, Old John had a merry time watching his customers and neighbors get pounded by the hammer, rocked and bounced by the rocking chair, and thrashed by the bush. He was delighted that his wishes had come true. He couldn’t conceal his merriment at the sight of some fellow staggering home with bumps all over his head, or another careening about with dizziness⁸⁾, or someone else howling with dismay and agony as the bush ripped him up.

“That’ll teach you.” Old John told his victims as they ran off. “Maybe now I can get some work done around here.”

Of course it didn’t take people long to stop hanging around the blacksmith shop. They left Old John alone to do his work and barely even said “hello” if they had to have any dealings with him. Whenever possible, of course, people took their work to other blacksmiths, even if it meant the inconvenience of having to travel quite a long way to do so. In time, Old John just became meaner and surlier and he wasn’t even amused any more when some innocent new customer made the mistake of trying to borrow his hammer or sit in his rocking chair or break a branch from his forsythia bush.

When the time came for John to die, his soul, of course, was turned over to the Devil. And as soon as the Devil got the news, he popped over to John’s blacksmith shop. He appeared beside John just as the figure in white had done. John was, as usual, clanging away at his work.

“Your time’s up, ” the Devil said. “Let’s go. ”

“Go? ” John said, astonished. “Go where? ”

“Where do you think you’re going?” the Devil said. “You’re coming with me.”

“If that’s how it must be,” Old John said. “Just let me finish this last bit of work. Have a dipper of water — you must be thirsty — and take a rest in my rocking chair and I’ll be right with you.”

“I’ll give you about two minutes,” the Devil said. He dipped some water from the bucket by the door and sat down in Old John’s rocking chair out in the sun. The rocking chair, of course, began to rock and spin and bounce and shake. It tumbled and rolled and flipped and flopped, trembled and shimmied and looped and careened. The Devil was certainly getting a wild ride. Old John had no intention of ever telling the rocking chair to stop, now that it had captured the Devil, and he cheered as the Devil got banged and bounced and tossed about. But the Devil is awfully strong, stronger than any old rocking chair, and pretty soon the rocking chair flew apart.

The Devil, staggering with dizziness, was mad as hornets. “You can’t get away with that,” he growled. “I’ll whip you all the way to Hell for such a trick.” Saying this, he grabbed the branches of Old John’s forsythia bush. The bush, of course, yanked the Devil inside and began to thrash him with all its branches. For a moment all you could see were the Devil’s feet kicking above the leaves and all you could hear was his roar of anger and dismay and pain. Old John cheered again as the bush flayed away at its captive and of course Old John had no intention of ever telling the bush to let go. But the Devil is stronger than any bush and after a time, he tumbled out onto the ground, groaning and slashed to ribbons, but angrier than ever. He was so angry his eyes flashed red and he chased Old John into the shop.

“That does it,” the Devil said. “For a trick like that I’m going to murder you on the spot and drag your soul to hell in a burlap sack.” Saying this, he grabbed Old John’s hammer.

Old John’s hammer, of course, did what it was supposed to do and began to pound the Devil all a bout his head and body. It pounded his hooves and his ears, his forehead and his nose; the hammer pounded the Devil on his horns and on his tail; it pounded his skull⁹⁾ and hit him in the stomach. The hammer swung the devil around the shop and beat him everywhere, and beat him hard. But of course you can’t beat the Devil. The Devil threw himself in to the fire, which he is quite used to, being from Hell, and finally the handle of the hammer burned off and the Devil was free. He roared¹⁰⁾ a roar of such anger that every wall in the village trembled and pots and pans fell off the shelves. People thought an earthquake had occurred.

Just then there was a swirl of white and Old John disappeared. To his astonishment, Old John found himself in heaven standing next to the figure who had given him the three wishes with which he might have saved his soul.

“But what am I doing here?” Old John asked. “I thought I was too mean to ever land in heaven.”

“Yes, but you’ve also proved mean enough to humiliate the Devil,” the figure said.

“We guess that’s worth something after all, since we’ve been trying for ages without much success. Besides,” he said, handing John a hammer, “we need a good blacksmith up here.”

老约翰与魔鬼

（一则美国民间故事）

这个故事起源于美国东南部。故事发生在汽车时代之前，那时人们用马做交通工具。铁匠，也就是制作马蹄铁和其他金属用品的人，那个时候在当地是相当重要的人物。因为人人都需要马蹄铁、炊事用具、金属工具、以及钉子之类的东西，而这些都得由铁匠来做；铁匠的铺子也就成了街坊邻里聚集会面的地方。

从前，有一个铁匠，人们管他叫“老约翰”。方圆几英里之内，就他一个铁匠，又因为他活儿做得好，他的铺子里常常聚集着邻居、老朋友和村里其他店铺的老板。老约翰本人却不是个友善的人。事实上，他是个有名的脾气坏、心胸狭窄、喜怒无常的人。他总是抱怨人们借走他的工具，坐在他的摇椅里聊大天儿混时间，还从他的连翘树丛里折树枝做马鞭。大家一般也都忍了，不忍也不行，因为他的手艺好；可没有人能理解，像他这样一个比较富裕又是社区举足轻重的人物，怎么会如此小气。

这一天，老约翰不太忙。当他正“叮当叮当”地打制工具时，一个身着白色长袍的身影出现在他眼前。

“老约翰，”人影说，“我来这儿是要给你一个机会让你赎罪来解救你的灵魂。”

老约翰只管继续敲敲打打地干活儿。“是吗？”他咧嘴一乐，“谁说我需要赎罪？”

“人人都知道，”影子说，“你这个人毫无慷慨之心，而且心胸狭窄。”

“真的？”老约翰说着举起锤子在人面前挥了挥，“那你认为该怎么办呢？”

“我被授权给予你三个愿望，”影子说道。

“好吧，我也被授权告诉你你说什么我都不信，”老约翰回敬道，“如果你不马上给我滚开，再打扰我干活，我就要亲手把你扔出去。”]

“我必须告诉你我并非戏言，”影子说，“你最好认真考虑一下你的愿望都是什么，因为你进入天堂的机缘将取决于此。”

老约翰大笑道：“嘿，我倒是觉得我进天堂的机缘和大家一样好，我只是干活儿、吃饭、睡觉，踢开那些绊脚的狗，赶走那些来闲逛的二流子。这有什么错？”

影子摇了摇模糊不清的头，说道：“你的三个愿望是什么，老约翰？我没有时间跟你耗了。”

老约翰用手背抹了一下胡子，说：“好吧，我就陪你玩玩吧。我的第一个愿望是这样的。你知道，总是有人来借我的锤子修理大车轮子什么的。每当我要用到的时候，锤子就不见了，我还得去找它。现在我希望，凡想借我锤子的人都会粘在锤子上，锤子会把他们打得团团转，直到我说：‘锤子，放开吧。’这该能使他们不再来借我的锤子了。”

“如果这是你的愿望，那你将得到满足。”影子说道，话音里带着忧伤。

“第二，”老约翰说，“人们老是要坐我院子里的摇椅，我都烦死了。我累了想坐下来喝罐水吧，看到有那么几个乡巴佬叨着烟斗，翘着二郎腿，像个天生的懒虫那样，没完没了地聊大天。现在我要摇椅抓住坐在里面的人，使劲摇，使劲转，使劲颠，把他们弄得晕头转向，直到我说：‘摇椅，停下吧。’这该解决这个小问题了。”

“你这是在浪费你获救的机会，老约翰，”影子说，“但是如果这是你的愿望，也只有如此了。你的最后一个愿望是什么？你还有最后一个机会可以要求一样好东西，请你考虑好再回答。”

“根本用不着考虑。”老约翰说，“我要什么我自己很清楚。你看见门边的连翘树丛了

吗？总是有人从那树丛里折树枝做马鞭。从现在起，谁要想折树枝，我要那树丛缠住他们，拖进树丛，鞭打他们，打得他们嗷嗷地叫，一直不松开也不停鞭，直到我说：‘树丛，停下吧。’”

人影绝望地摇了摇头，“你的愿望都将实现。”然后它就消失了。

在接下来的日子里，老约翰很开心地看到他的顾客和邻居们遭到锤子打，被摇椅摇晃，受树枝痛打。他很高兴他的愿望都实现了。看见这个家伙满头大包踉跄着回家，或那个家伙晕头转向，东倒西歪，还有的被树枝抽打得哀嚎不绝，老约翰就简直忍不住地乐。

“好好教训你们一下。”老约翰冲着正在逃开的那些受罚者说，“这下我大概可以安静地把活儿干完了。”

人们自然也很快不到铁匠铺子来了。他们让老约翰一个人干他的活儿，如果有事不得不找他时甚至都不和他说话“你好”。只要有可能，他们就把活儿交给别的铁匠去做，即使这意味着需要多走些路，他们也不在乎。最终，老约翰变得愈加自私小气，脾气暴躁，而且即使当有不知情的新顾客误借了他的锤子，误坐了他的摇椅，或误折了他的连翘树枝，老约翰看见他们受罚时，也不再觉得开心了。

当老约翰的死期来临时，他的灵魂当然被交给了魔鬼。魔鬼一得到消息就来到老约翰的铺子，他就像那个白衣影子一样出现在老约翰身边。像往常一样，老约翰正叮当叮当地干他的活儿。“你的时间到了，”魔鬼说，“我们走吧。”

“走？”老约翰吃惊地问，“去哪儿？”

“你想你要去哪儿？”魔鬼说，“你跟我来。”

“要是非得这样的话，”老约翰说，“那让我把这最后一点活儿干完吧。喝点水吧——你一定渴了——坐在我的摇椅里休息一会儿，我一会儿就跟你走。”

“我给你两分钟的时间，”魔鬼说着就去门边的桶里舀了点水喝，然后坐在外面阳光下老约翰的摇椅里。摇椅马上开始摇晃、旋转、颤抖起来，一阵阵狂旋乱颠，魔鬼自然被颠得要发狂。老约翰见椅子困住了魔鬼，根本就没想叫它停下来，而是欢叫着观望魔鬼在椅子上颠晃。可是魔鬼特别结实，任何一把摇椅也奈何不了他，不一会儿，摇椅就散架了。

魔鬼晕头转向，站立不稳，暴跳如雷。“我饶不了你。”他咆哮着。“跟我要花招，我要一路用鞭子抽着你去地狱。”说着他拽了一把老约翰的连翘枝，树枝当然就猛力地把魔鬼拖了进去，劈头盖脑地抽打起来，只见魔鬼两脚乱蹬，只听见他又气又恼又痛苦的嚎叫声。老约翰在一旁还是高兴地观望着树丛把它的俘虏抽个体无完肤，他当然也没想让树丛停下来。然而魔鬼却比任何树丛都有力气。过了一会儿，他滚了出来，遍体鳞伤呻吟着，却愈发气势汹汹。他气得两眼发红，把老约翰追进了铺子。

“够了。”魔鬼说，“就凭这个花招，我现在就杀了你，再把你的灵魂装在麻袋里一路拖到地狱里去。”他说着抓起了老约翰的锤子。

锤子自然不客气地干它该干的事，马上开始劈头盖脑地打魔鬼，打他的脚，他的耳朵，他的前额，他的鼻子，他的角，他的尾巴，他的脑壳，他的肚子。锤子把魔鬼追打得在铺子里团团转，锤遍他的全身，狠狠地揍他。可是魔鬼是打不坏的，他跳进了火里——这在他倒是平常的事，因为他来自地狱——终于，锤子的把柄被烧掉，魔鬼自由了。他怒吼一声，村子里的每一座墙都在颤抖，锅碗瓢盆都从架子上掉下来，人们以为发生了地震。

正当这时，一道白光闪过，老约翰消失了。老约翰万分吃惊地发现自己天堂里，身边站着那个曾给他原本可拯救他灵魂的三个愿望的影子。

“我来这儿干什么？”老约翰问道，“我以为我太自私不能升天堂了。”

“是这样的，但是你同时也证明你已经自私到连魔鬼也会被你羞辱的地步，”影子说着，“我们想这倒也是有价值的，因为我们已尝试多年却没成功。此外，”说着他递给老约翰一把锤子，“我们这里也正需要一个好铁匠呢。”

NOTE 注释：

folktale ['fəʊkteɪl] n. 民间故事

temperamental [ˌtempərə'mentl] adj. 喜怒无常的

redeem [ri'di:m] vt. 解救

generosity [ˌdʒenə'rɒsɪti] n. 慷慨，宽大

loafer ['ləʊfə] n. 流浪者

salvation [sæl'veɪʃən] n. 拯救，救助

forsythia [fɔ:'saɪθjə] n. 连翘属植物

dizziness [dɪzɪnɪs] n. 头昏眼花

skull [skʌl] n. 头脑，头骨

roar [rɔ:] v. 怒吼，咆哮