

The Devil and the Old Man

By John Masefield

Up away north, in the old days, there was a man who never throve. Nothing he put his hand to ever prospered, and as his state worsened, his friends fell away, and he grew desperate. So one night when he was alone in his room, thinking of the rent due in two or three days and the money he couldn't scrape together, he cried out, "I wish I could sell my soul to the devil like that man the old books tell about.

Now just as he spoke the clock struck twelve, and, while it chimed, a sparkle began to burn about the room, and the air, all at once, began to smell of brimstone, and a voice said:

"Will these terms suit you?"

He then saw that some one had just placed a parchment there. He picked it up and read it through; and being in despair, and not knowing what he was doing, he answered "Yes," and looked round for a pen.

"Take and sign," said the voice again, "but first consider what it is you do; do nothing rashly. Consider."

So he thought awhile; then "Yes" he said, "I'll sign," and with that he groped for the pen.

"Blood from your left thumb and sign,"

So he pricked his left thumb and signed.

"Here is your earnest money," said the voice. "nine and twenty silver pennies. This day twenty years hence I shall see you again."

Now early next morning our friend came to himself and felt like one of the drowned. "What a dream I've had," he said. Then he woke up and saw the nine and twenty silver pennies and smelt a faint smell of brimstone.

So he sat in his chair there, and remembered that he had sold his soul to the devil for twenty years of heart's-desire; and whatever fears he may have had as to what might come at the end of those twenty years, he found comfort in the thought that, after all, twenty years is a good stretch of time and that throughout them he could eat, drink, merry-make, roll in gold, dress in silk, and be care-free, heart at ease and jib-sheet to windward.

So for nineteen years and nine months he lived in great state, having his heart's desire in all things; but, when his twenty years were nearly run through, there was no wretcheder man in all the world than that poor fellow. So he threw up his house, his position, riches, everything, and away he went to the port of Liverpool, where he signed on as A.B., aboard a Black Ball packet, a tea clipper, bound to the China seas.

They made a fine passage out, and when our friend had only three days more, they were in the Indian Ocean lying lazy, becalmed.

Now it was his wheel that forenoon, and it being dead calm, all he had to do was just to think of things; the ship of course having no way on her.

So he stood there, hanging on to the spokes, groaning and weeping till, just twenty minutes or so before eight bells were made, up came the Captain for a turn on deck.

He went aft, of course, took a squint aloft, and saw our friend crying at the wheel. "Hello, my man," he says, "why, what's all this? Ain't you well? You'd best lay aft for a dose o' salts at four bells to-night."

"No, cap'n," said the man, "there's no salts'll ever cure sickness."

Why, what's all this?" says the old man. "You must be sick if it's as bad as all that. But come now; your cheek is all sunk, and you look as if you ain't slept well. What is it ails you, anyway? Have you anything on your mind?"

"Captain," he answers very solemn, "I have sold my soul to the devil."

"Oh," said the old man, "why, that's bad. That's powerful bad. I never thought them sort of things ever happened outside a book."

"But," said our friend, "that's not the worst of it, Captain. At this time three days hence the devil will fetch me home."

"Good Lord!" groaned the old man. "Here's a nice hurrah's nest to happen aboard my ship. But come now," he went on, "did the devil give you no chance—no saving-clause like? Just think quietly for a moment."

"Yes, Captain," said our friend, "just when I made the deal, there came a whisper in my ear. And," he said, speaking very quietly, so as not to let the mate hear, "if I can give the devil three jobs to do which he cannot do, why, then, Captain," he says, "I'm saved, and that deed of mine is cancelled."

Well, at this the old man grinned and said, "You just leave things to me, my son. *I'll* fix the devil for you. Aft there, one o' you, and relieve the wheel. Now you run forward, and have a good watch below, and be quite easy in your mind, for I'll deal with the devil for you. You rest and be easy."

And so that day goes by, and the next, and the one after that, and the one after that was the day the devil was due.

Soon as eight bells was made in the morning watch, the old man called all hands aft.

"Men," he said, "I've got an all-hands job for you this forenoon."

"Mr. Mate," he cried, "get all hands on to the main-tops'l halliards and bowse the sail stiff up and down."

So they passed along the halliards, and took the turns off, and old John Chantyman piped up—

There's a Black Ball clipper
Comin' down the river.

And away the yard went to the mast-head till the bunt-robands jammed in the sheave.

"Very well that," said the old man. "Now get my dinghy off o' the half-deck and let her drag alongside."

So they did that, too.

"Very well that," said the old man. "Now forrard with you, to the chain-locker, and rouse out every inch of chain you find there."

So forrard they went, and the chain was lighted up and flaked along the deck for clear running.

"Now, Chips," says the old man to the carpenter, "just bend the spare anchor to the end of that chain, and clear away the fo'c's'le rails ready for when we let go."

So they did this, too.

"Now," said the old man, "get them tubs of slush from the galley. Pass that slush along there, doctor. Very well that. Now turn to, all hands, and slush away every link in that chain a good inch thick in grease."

So they did that, too, and wondered what the old man meant.

"Very well that," cries the old man. "Now get below all hands! Chips, on to the fo'c's'le head with you and stand by! I'll keep the deck, Mr. Mate! Very well that"

So all hands tumbled down below; Chips took a fill o' baccy to leeward of the capstan, and the old man walked the weather-poop looking for a sign of hell-fire.

It was still dead calm—but presently, towards six bells, he raised a black cloud away to leeward, and saw the glimmer of the lightning in it; only the flashes were too red, and came too quick.

“Now,” says he to himself, “stand by.”

Very soon that black cloud worked up to windward, right alongside, and there came a red flash, and a strong sulphurous smell, and then a loud peal of thunder as the devil steps aboard.

“Mornin', cap'n,” says he.

“Mornin', Mr. Devil,” says the old man, “and what in blazes do you want aboard *my* ship?”

“Why, Captain,” said the devil, “I've come for the soul of one of your hands as per signed agreement: and, as my time's pretty full up in these wicked days, I hope you won't keep me waiting for him longer than need be.”

“Well, Mr. Devil,” says the old man, “the man you come for is down below, sleeping, just at this moment. It's a fair pity to call him up till it's right time. So supposin' I set you them three tasks. How would that be? Have you any objections?”

“Why, no,” said the devil, “fire away as soon as you like.”

“Mr. Devil,” said the old man, “you see that main-tops'l yard? Suppose you lay out on that main-tops'l yard and take in three reefs single-handed.”

“Ay, ay, sir,” the devil said, and he ran up the ratlines, into the top, up the topmast rigging and along the yard.

Well, when he found the sail stiff up and down, he hailed the deck:

“Below there! On deck there! Lower away ya halliards!”

“I will not,” said the old man, “nary a lower.”

“Come up your sheets, then,” cries the devil. “This main-topsail's stiff up-and-down. How'm I to take in three reefs when the sail's stiff up-and-down?”

“Why,” said the old man, “*you can't do it*. Come out o' that! Down from aloft, you hoof-footed son. That's one to me.”

“Yes,” says the devil, when he got on deck again. “I don't deny it, cap'n. That's one to you.”

“Now, Mr. Devil,” said the old man, going towards the rail, “suppose you was to step into that little boat alongside there. Will you please?”

“Ay, ay, sir,” he said, and he slid down the forrard fall, got into the stern sheets, and sat down.

“Now, Mr. Devil,” said the skipper, taking a little salt spoon from his vest pocket, “supposin' you bail all the water on that side the boat on to this side the boat, using this spoon as your dipper.”

Well!—the devil just looked at him.

“Say!” he said at length, “which of the New England States d'ye hail from anyway?”

“Not Jersey, anyway,” said the old man. “That's two up, alright; ain't it, sonny?”

“Yes,” growls the devil, as he climbs aboard. “That's two up. Two to you and one to play. Now, what's your next contraption?”

“Mr. Devil,” said the old man, looking very innocent, “you see, I've ranged my chain ready for letting go anchor. Now Chips is forrard there, and when I sing out, he'll let the anchor go. Supposin' you stopper the chain with them big hands o' yourn and keep it from running out clear. Will you, please?”

So the devil takes off his coat and rubs his hands together, and gets away forrard by the bits, and stands by.

“All ready, cap’n,” he says.

“All ready, Chips?” asked the old man.

“All ready, sir,” replies Chips.

“Then, stand by—Let *go* the anchor,” and clink, clink, old Chips knocks out the pin, and away goes the spare anchor and greased chain into a five mile deep of God’s sea. As I said, they were in the Indian Ocean.

Well—there was the devil, making a grab here and a grab there, and the slushy chain just slipping through his claws, and at whiles a bight of chain would spring clear and rap him in the eye.

So at last the cable was nearly clean gone, and the devil ran to the last big link (which was seized to the heel of the foremast), and he put both his arms through it, and hung on to it like grim death.

But the chain gave such a *Yank* when it came-to, that the big link carried away, and oh, roll and go, out it went through the hawsehole, in a shower of bright sparks, carrying the devil with it. There is no devil now. The devil’s dead.

As for the old man, he looked over the bows watching the bubbles burst, but the devil never rose. Then he went to the fo’c’s’le scuttle and banged thereon with a hand-spike.

“Rouse out, there, the Port Watch!” he called, “an’ get my dinghy inboard.”