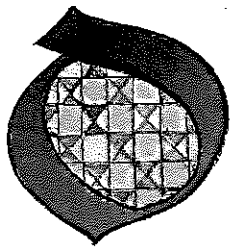


# THE OLD WOMAN AND THE DEVIL



nce there was an old woman. Every day she liked to go to the suq and sit on a certain shady patch of grass under a palm tree. Sometimes she would doze off, and other times she would sit and watch the people go by. Everyone in the city knew this was the old woman's place and left her alone.

Then one day the devil came to town. He saw the shady place by the edge of the market and decided that this would be a good spot to start working. That morning when the old woman came hobbling up to the suq, she saw the devil lying under the palm tree in her favorite spot. Well, this old woman had lived a long and difficult life already, and she'd kept worse company than the devil. She figured there was space enough under that palm tree for both of them, so she said good morning and made herself comfortable, just as usual.

For a few hours they got along fine, sitting quietly under the palm tree and gossiping. But when the devil comes to town, he attracts people with evil on their minds. By mid-morning the old woman's quiet corner had become the busiest place in the whole market. Before she knew what was happening, thieves and murderers and swindlers and all kinds of wicked people were milling around. It got so noisy, she couldn't think straight, never mind take a nap. People started stepping on her. Someone stole her purse.

So the old woman stood up and went over to the devil and poked him with her stick. "Listen, you," she said to him. "You go find some other place to do your business. This is my spot, and I can't sleep with all this noise. Not only that, but someone just stole my purse."

The devil looked up at her and twirled his mustache. He laughed. "You silly old crone. Don't you know who you're talking to? I'm the devil, and if I decide this is where I want to do business, then this is where I'll do business."

"What's so special about being the devil?" the old woman snorted. "Why, you have no more brains than a chicken, as far as I can see."

Now the devil got so indignant that his horns started to glow. "What do you mean, I've no more brains than a chicken? Who do you think is responsible for all the grief and destruction in this world? Why, just look at all the thieves and murderers, the swindlers and liars and cheaters I've managed to attract in just one morning!"

The old woman snorted again. "Thieves and murderers? You call that a good morning's work? Anyone can attract thieves and murderers. I don't see what's so devilish about that."

"Well, could you do better, old woman?" the devil sputtered.

"I most certainly could."

"That's something I'd like to see," the devil scoffed.

"Very well, you old goat. If you really want to see some devilish work, I'll show you how it's done. But you have to promise that afterward you'll find some other place to do business and leave me alone."

"Ha!" cried the devil. "If you can show me how an old crone like you could be more devilish than the devil himself, I'll take my work elsewhere. But if you can't, you'd do best to watch your tongue and quit your nagging, for things could go worse for you."

"Very well," agreed the old woman. "But remember: once I've proved myself more devilish than you, you must leave me in peace."

She pointed across the square to a prosperous shop, with bolts of colorful cloth from around the world laid out on tables outside the door. "That cloth merchant and his wife have been happily married for well over a year now."

"Yes, I know," said the devil grumpily. "I've managed to stir up trouble in a thousand households around this city, but try as I might, I can't seem to destroy the happiness of that couple."

"Didn't I say you're no brighter than a chicken? Devil or not, you haven't the wits of an old woman. By this evening, that happy couple will be ready for divorce and you will be packing up and moving out of here."

With these words, the old crone stamped off to her house. There she changed her rags for the elegant gown of a rich lady. Then she hurried back to the cloth merchant's shop.

The cloth merchant was delighted to see such a wealthy customer and brought the old woman a glass of mint tea while she carefully inspected all the most expensive silks in the shop.

"No, none of these are quite right," the old woman exclaimed at last. "I need something

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truly extraordinary. You see, my son has fallen in love with a married woman. It's terrible, but what can I do? He is my only son, the light of my life, and he claims if he can't persuade this woman to leave her husband, he will die of a broken heart. She has agreed to run away with him if he can find her a bolt of cloth more beautiful than any other in this city."

The cloth merchant sympathized with the old woman's problem and went into one of his back rooms where he kept a length of stunningly embroidered silk, imported from the Orient and too fine to put on display with the rest of his merchandise.

"That is just what I've been looking for!" the old woman cried in delight. She paid the cloth merchant a handsome price and hurried off with the package of cloth clutched tightly under her arm.

Then she went straight to the cloth merchant's home and pounded on the door. When his wife appeared, the old woman explained that she was traveling through town and had grown faint from the heat. Could she come in and rest for a few moments, perhaps have a drink of water? The cloth merchant's wife invited her in with a kind smile and begged her to make herself comfortable in the sitting room.

While the wife went off to fetch some cool water from the kitchen, the old woman left her package under one of the low tables in the room, a place where it was sure to be noticed before the end of the day. Then, having thanked the merchant's wife for her hospitality, she continued on her way.

That evening the cloth merchant returned to his home and, as was his custom, went into the sitting room to relax before the call to evening prayer. There he found the package the old woman had left behind and opened it, his hands trembling. Sure enough, it was the very same piece of cloth he'd sold that morning. And what had the old lady said? Her son had fallen in love with a married woman — she must have meant his wife!

Crazy with jealousy, the merchant ran to the kitchen and began to curse at his wife, shouting and throwing all the dishes in the house at her. His wife, convinced her husband had gone mad, ran home to her parents, weeping over her terrible fate.

"Well," said the old woman to the devil, from where they watched just outside the cloth merchant's house, "who has proven to be more devilish today, you or I?"

"You've certainly succeeded where I had failed. They are very unhappy," the devil was forced to admit.

"True. Now you see that an old woman's wits are far superior to those of the devil. But you have only just begun to understand. For while you may be able to bring grief and strife and unhappiness to a home, I am able to bring an unhappy family back together again."

"Ha!" cried the devil. "Are you saying that you could repair the damage all your devilish work has caused today? Never in a million years!"

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"Just watch me," the old woman said, laughing.

Bright and early the next morning, she dressed herself once more in the clothes of a rich lady and went back to the cloth merchant's shop.

"Have you any more of that cloth you sold me yesterday?" she asked the merchant. "On my way home from your shop yesterday, I stopped in some kind woman's home for a drink of water, for I was feeling faint from the heat. Foolishly, I forgot my package of cloth at her house, and now I can't remember what the address was."

The merchant listened to her story with amazement. Then he handed her the package of cloth. "It was my house where you stopped, madam, and it was my good wife who offered you the drink of water. How fortunate that your cloth is not lost after all," he said. Then he quickly closed up his shop and hurried to his wife's parents' house to beg forgiveness.

The wife, who truly loved her husband, quickly forgave him and agreed to return home. The devil, admitting defeat, took his business elsewhere and was never seen in that city again. As for the old woman, she has lived in peace from that day to this.