



Learn English Through Stories

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The Cunning Shoemaker



Once upon a time there lived a shoemaker who could get no work to do, and was so poor that he and his wife nearly died of hunger. At last he said to her, 'It is no use waiting on here--I can find nothing; so I shall go down to Mascalucia, and perhaps there I shall be more lucky.'

So down he went to Mascalucia, and walked through the streets crying, 'Who wants some shoes?' And very soon a window was pushed up, and a woman's head was thrust out of it.

'Here are a pair for you to patch,' she said. And he sat down on her doorstep and set about patching them.

'How much do I owe you?' she asked when they were done.

'A shilling.'

'Here is eighteenpence, and good luck to you.' And he went his way. He turned into the next street and set up his cry again, and it was not long before another window was pushed up and another head appeared.

'Here are some shoes for you to patch.'

And the shoemaker sat down on the doorstep and patched them.

'How much do I owe you?' asked the woman when the shoes were finished.

'A florin.'

'Here is a crown piece, and good luck to you.' And she shut the window.

'Well,' thought the shoemaker, 'I have done finely. But I will not go back to my wife just yet, as, if I only go on at this rate, I shall soon have enough money to buy a donkey.'

Having made up his mind what was best to do, he stayed in the town a few days longer till he had four gold pieces safe in his purse. Then he went to the market and for two of them he bought a good strong donkey, and, mounting on its back, he rode home to Catania. But as he entered a thick wood he saw in the distance a band of robbers who were coming quickly towards him.

'I am lost,' thought he; 'they are sure to take from me all the money that I have earned, and I shall be as poor as ever I was. What can I do?' However, being a

clever little man and full of spirit, he did not lose heart, but, taking five florins, he fastened them out of sight under the donkey's thick mane. Then he rode on.

Directly the robber came up to him they seized him exactly as he had foretold and took away all his money.

'Oh, dear friends!' he cried, wringing his hands, 'I am only a poor shoemaker, and have nothing but this donkey left in the world.'

As he spoke the donkey gave himself a shake, and down fell the five florins.

'Where did that come from?' asked the robbers.

'Ah,' replied the shoemaker, 'you have guessed my secret. The donkey is a golden donkey, and supplies me with all my money.'

'Sell him to us,' said the robbers. 'We will give you any price you like.'

The shoemaker at first declared that nothing would induce him to sell him, but at last he agreed to hand him over to the robbers for fifty gold pieces. 'But listen to what I tell you,' said he. 'You must each take it in turn to own him for a night and a day, or else you will all be fighting over the money.'

With these words they parted, the robbers driving the donkey to their cave in the forest and the shoemaker returning home, very pleased with the success of his trick. He just stopped on the way to pick up a good dinner, and the next day spent most of his gains in buying a small vineyard.

Meanwhile the robbers had arrived at the cave where they lived, and the captain, calling them all round him, announced that it was his right to have the donkey for the first night. His companions agreed, and then he told his wife to put a mattress in the stable. She asked if he had gone out of his mind, but he answered crossly, 'What is that to you? Do as you are bid, and to-morrow I will bring you some treasures.'

Very early the captain awoke and searched the stable, but could find nothing, and guessed that Master Joseph had been making fun of them. 'Well,' he said to himself, 'if I have been taken in, the others shall not come off any better.'

So, when one of his men arrived and asked him eagerly how much money he had got, he answered gaily, 'Oh, comrade, if you only knew! But I shall say nothing about it till everyone has had his turn!'

One after another they all took the donkey, but no money was forthcoming for anybody. At length, when all the band had been tricked, they held a council, and resolved to march to the shoemaker's house and punish him well for his cunning. Just as before, the shoemaker saw them a long way off, and began to think how he could outwit them again. When he had hit upon a plan he called

his wife, and said to her, 'Take a bladder and fill it with blood, and bind it round your neck. When the robbers come and demand the money they gave me for the donkey I shall shout to you and tell you to get it quickly. You must argue with me, and decline to obey me, and then I shall plunge my knife into the bladder, and you must fall to the ground as if you were dead. There you must lie till I play on my guitar; then get up and begin to dance.'

The wife made haste to do as she was bid, and there was no time to lose, for the robbers were drawing very near the house. They entered with a great noise, and overwhelmed the shoemaker with reproaches for having deceived them about the donkey.

'The poor beast must have lost its power owing to the change of masters,' said he; 'but we will not quarrel about it. You shall have back the fifty gold pieces that you gave for him. Aite,' he cried to his wife, 'go quickly to the chest upstairs, and bring down the money for these gentlemen.'

'Wait a little,' answered she; 'I must first bake this fish. It will be spoilt if I leave it now.'

'Go this instant, as you are bid,' shouted the shoemaker, stamping as if he was in a great passion; but, as she did not stir, he drew his knife, and stabbed her in the neck. The blood spurted out freely, and she fell to the ground as if she was dead.

'What have you done?' asked the robbers, looking at him in dismay. 'The poor woman was doing nothing.'

'Perhaps I was hasty, but it is easily set right,' replied the shoemaker, taking down his guitar and beginning to play. Hardly had he struck the first notes than his wife sat up; then got on her feet and danced.

The robbers stared with open mouths, and at last they said, 'Master Joseph, you may keep the fifty gold pieces. But tell us what you will take for your guitar, for you must sell it to us?'

'Oh, that is impossible!' replied the shoemaker, 'for every time I have a quarrel with my wife I just strike her dead, and so give vent to my anger. This has become such a habit with me that I don't think I could break myself of it; and, of course, if I got rid of the guitar I could never bring her back to life again.'

However, the robbers would not listen to him, and at last he consented to take forty gold pieces for the guitar.

Then they all returned to their cave in the forest, delighted with their new purchase, and longing for a chance of trying its powers. But the captain

declared that the first trial belonged to him, and after that the others might have their turn.

That evening he called to his wife and said, 'What have you got for supper?'

'Macaroni,' answered she.

'Why have you not boiled a fish?' he cried, and stabbed in the neck so that she fell dead. The captain, who was not in the least angry, seized the guitar and began to play; but, let him play as loud as he would, the dead woman never stirred. 'Oh, lying shoemaker! Oh, abominable knave! Twice has he got the better of me. But I will pay him out!'

So he raged and swore, but it did him no good. The fact remained that he had killed his wife and could not bring her back again.

The next morning came one of the robbers to fetch the guitar, and to hear what had happened.

'Well, how have you got on?'

'Oh, splendidly! I stabbed my wife, and then began to play, and now she is as well as ever.'

'Did you really? Then this evening I will try for myself.'

Of course the same thing happened over again, till all the wives had been killed secretly, and when there were no more left they whispered to each other the dreadful tale, and swore to be avenged on the shoemaker.

The band lost no time in setting out for his house, and, as before, the shoemaker saw them coming from afar. He called to his wife, who was washing in the kitchen: 'Listen, Aita: when the robbers come and ask for me say I have gone to the vineyard. Then tell the dog to call me, and chase him from the house.'

When he had given these directions he ran out of the back door and hid behind a barrel. A few minutes later the robbers arrived, and called loudly for the shoemaker.

'Alas! good gentlemen, he is up in the vineyard, but I will send the dog after him at once. Here! now quickly to the vineyard, and tell your master some gentlemen are here who wish to speak to him. Go as fast as you can.' And she opened the door and let the dog out.

'You can really trust the dog to call your husband?' asked the robbers.

'Dear me, yes! He understands everything, and will always carry any message I give him.'

By-and-bye the shoemaker came in and said, 'Good morning, gentlemen; the dog tells me you wish to speak to me.'

'Yes, we do,' replied the robber; 'we have come to speak to you about that guitar. It is your fault that we have murdered all our wives; and, though we played as you told us, none of them ever came back to life.'

'You could not have played properly,' said the shoemaker. 'It was your own fault.'

'Well, we will forget all about it,' answered the robbers, 'if you will only sell us your dog.'

'Oh, that is impossible! I should never get on without him.'

But the robbers offered him forty gold pieces, and at last he agreed to let them have the dog.

So they departed, taking the dog with them, and when they got back to their cave the captain declared that it was his right to have the first trial.

He then called his daughter, and said to her, 'I am going to the inn; if anybody wants me, loose the dog, and send him to call me.'

About an hour after some one arrived on business, and the girl untied the dog and said, 'Go to the inn and call my father!' The dog bounded off, but ran straight to the shoemaker.

When the robber got home and found no dog he thought 'He must have gone back to his old master,' and, though night had already fallen, he went off after him.

'Master Joseph, is the dog here?' asked he.

'Ah! yes, the poor beast is so fond of me! You must give him time to get accustomed to new ways.'

So the captain brought the dog back, and the following morning handed him over to another of the band, just saying that the animal really could do what the shoemaker had said.

The second robber carefully kept his own counsel, and fetched the dog secretly back from the shoemaker, and so on through the whole band. At length, when everybody had suffered, they met and told the whole story, and next day they all marched off in fury to the man who had made game of them. After reproaching him with having deceived them, they tied him up in a sack, and told him they were going to throw him into the sea. The shoemaker lay quite still, and let them do as they would.

They went on till they came to a church, and the robbers said, 'The sun is hot and the sack is heavy; let us leave it here and go in and rest.' So they put the sack down by the roadside, and went into the church.

Now, on a hill nearby there was a swineherd looking after a great herd of pigs and whistling merrily.

When Master Joseph heard him he cried out as loud as he could, 'I won't; I won't, I say.'

'What won't you do?' asked the swineherd.

'Oh,' replied the shoemaker. 'They want me to marry the king's daughter, and I won't do it.'

'How lucky you are!' sighed the swineherd. 'Now, if it were only me!'

'Oh, if that's all!' replied the cunning shoemaker, 'get you into this sack, and let me out.'

Then the swineherd opened the sack and took the place of the shoemaker, who went gaily off, driving the pigs before him.

When the robbers were rested they came out of the church, took up the sack, and carried it to the sea, where they threw it in, and it sank directly. As they came back they met the shoemaker, and stared at him with open mouths.

'Oh, if you only knew how many pigs live in the sea,' he cried. 'And the deeper you go the more there are. I have just brought up these, and mean to return for some more.'

'There are still some left there?'

'Oh, more than I could count,' replied the shoemaker. 'I will show you what you must do.' Then he led the robbers back to the shore. 'Now,' said he, 'you must each of you tie a stone to your necks, so that you may be sure to go deep enough, for I found the pigs that you saw very deep down indeed.'

Then the robbers all tied stones round their necks, and jumped in, and were drowned, and Master Joseph drove his pigs home, and was a rich man to the end of his days.

The End.