



The Two Weavers and the Devil's Grandmother

Germany

Long, long ago, there lived two weavers in a small mountainous town and, since they were the only weavers for many miles around, everyone bought their clothes from them to protect themselves from the cold of winter.

One of the weavers was a good man, who tried to offer good clothes at the most reasonable prices. He also took care of his employees and treated his suppliers as best he could. However, the other weaver was a greedy man who paid his workers poorly and always sought to deceive suppliers and customers. But his fabrics had more vivid colours than those of the kind weaver. So, little by little, the greedy weaver gained ground commercially, gradually stealing the kind weaver's clientele. Finally, the day came when the good-natured weaver had to lay off his employees, and shortly after he was forced to close his weaving mill and shop.

One day, the greedy weaver called in his old competitor and offered him a job as his employee. He thought that, with this, he would not only succeed in humiliating him, but would also make it clear, in the city and the region, that he was the only competent weaver, and that people would have no choice but to buy his garments.

The poor weaver worked all day with the loom –shuttle goes, shuttle comes– resting only for half an hour to eat, and then he continued at the loom –shuttle goes, shuttle comes– until late at night. So much work in order to receive a paltry wage!

‘Why do you pay me so little?’, the poor weaver protested, knowing that his protest was not going to be of much use to him. ‘It’s less than half of what I paid my employees’.

‘And look where it got you!’, replied the greedy weaver. ‘If you had done like me, you wouldn’t have to be working for me now.’

The poor weaver had to swallow his pride before the arrogant attitude of his former competitor, and the next day he returned to the loom again –shuttle goes, shuttle comes. That day he saw one of the shepherds who supplied him with wool arrive and, when the greedy weaver was serving a customer, they took the opportunity to talk. The shepherd told the poor weaver that his current boss was miserable and stingy, that he bought his worst wool, that of the oldest or sickest sheep, and that later he camouflaged the poor quality of the wool with bright colours.

The poor weaver began to understand how his once competitor had managed to steal his clientele, taking advantage of everyone around him and using the most heinous tricks in order to get the maximum profit at the expense of others. And, realising this, he began to feel relieved in his feelings of failure.

Actually, he had not failed as a weaver. He had been a good weaver, had made quality garments for everyone at reasonable prices. And he had treated his workers and suppliers humanely. He had not failed! Very simply, a soulless man had taken away his clients through deception and with a despicable moral sense.

But, that same day, an hour before the end of his work shift, when the Sun had already set, the greedy weaver called him to the place where the fabrics were dyed.

‘Do you see that big jug?’, said his boss. ‘I want you to take it when you return home and to throw its contents in the lagoon.’

‘What is that?’, asked the poor weaver.

The greedy man smiled maliciously and said:

‘That’s one of the things with which I kept you out of business.’

And, without further explanation, he left.

Then one of the dyers said to the poor weaver when he was sure that the boss couldn't hear him:

'It's arsenic. He makes us work with it and with other dangerous products in order to get more intense dyes.'

'Arsenic!', exclaimed the poor weaver. 'With that he gets the green dye! And this is when I've been using spinach to create green colours.'

Then he understood everything. His current boss, in his greed, had resorted to unnatural, even dangerous, dyes in order to hide the poor quality of his wool and make his garments seem more attractive. Nothing had stopped that greedy man from getting his way and achieving his goals. How many more secrets would he discover while working for him?

But... this is a danger', he finally told the dyer, alarmed. 'We can't throw it in the lagoon, or anywhere. It's very poisonous!'

The dyer shrugged, as if to say 'If you say something you lose your job'.

But the poor weaver was unwilling to betray himself. He had assumed failure, and accepted the humiliation of having to work for the one who had ruined him, but he was not going to betray his honesty for a paltry bowl of lentils.

Taking off the apron which he wore when working at the loom – shuttle goes, shuttle comes–, he went straight to the greedy weaver and said:

'I'm not going to dump arsenic in the lagoon. You're a trickster and a bad person, and I'm not going to give you the pleasure of becoming like you. Now I know how you made me lose my business.'

'You are a duffer and a failure!', the evil one shouted. 'I already knew that I wasn't going to get anything good out of you. You're fired! And you can go to hell and never come back!'

The kind weaver did not want to discuss or extend his stay in that place any longer. He just wanted to lose sight of the con man who had ruined his life, even though he didn't know where to go or what to do.

He returned home, packed a bundle with a few belongings, put some food in a bag and, taking a pretty shawl that he had made with his own hands, set out into the dark of evening, aimlessly and not knowing what do with his life.

And, as he walked in his confusion and anguish, he thought that perhaps he should follow the advice of the wicked weaver.

‘Yes, I’ll go to hell’, he told himself with complete determination. ‘After all, I’ve nothing to do here.’

Without knowing how, he walked and walked until he reached the gates of hell. He knocked on the charred wood with his bare knuckles and a few seconds later the door was opened for him by an adorable old lady. Her glasses were perched on the tip of her nose and she held her knitting needles in one hand. However, two little horns timidly peeked out from under the scarf which she was wearing on his head.

‘What are you doing here?’, asked the old woman. ‘No one comes here of their own free will. Or is it that you are lost?’

‘No, I’m not lost’, said the weaver. ‘I’ve come of my own free will. My old colleague, and now boss, sent me here. I thought, maybe, it wasn’t a bad idea given how life has treated me on the other side.’

‘I’ve been walking all night and I’ve become a little cold’, he continued. ‘Won’t you let me in so that I can warm myself a bit in the fires of hell?’

The old woman opened her eyes in surprise. Never before in her already very long life had anyone voluntarily come to this place and made a comment like that.

‘Yes, of course, come in’, she finally said, ‘but I don’t know what I’m going to do with you because you seem too good to be here. Get yourself a little warm out there. But before dawn, I’ll have to hide you, because that is when my grandson’s demons return. They spend the night tormenting people in the world, and then they come in hungry and a bit unhinged. And if they see you, I don’t know what they will do with you.’

And so the weaver warmed himself a little in the fires of hell and, when he saw the first light of dawn appear, he returned to the old woman and she hid him in her bedroom, knowing that no one would enter there. Then, when the demons came, she fed them, and after a while they were all snoring loudly.

Then she called the weaver out of her bedroom and said:

‘You better go. This is not the place for you. If any of these brutes wake up, they’ll never let you escape from here.’

And the weaver, moved by the kindness of the old woman, took off the shawl which he appreciated so much and gave it to her:

‘Please accept this shawl’, he said. ‘I made it with my own hands, and I like it a lot, but I know that you’ll put it to good use and value the work of the weaving.’

The old woman took the shawl and, as her eyes blurred with tears, she said:

‘No one had ever given me a gift. And yes, it’s very nice. Also, there are days when the fires of hell are not enough to relieve the cold that gets into my bones.’

And, as the weaver was about to leave through the gates of hell, the old woman stopped him and said:

‘Wait, I want you to take something.’

He did not have to wait long as the old woman returned immediately with a little box.

‘I don’t know what happened to you on the other side’, said the old woman, ‘although I suppose you met some brutes like those who live here. Here, take this and your life will change completely.’

‘It’s a whisker from my grandson, the devil, but it’s going to bring you a lot of luck. Go home and you’ll see, everything you do will turn out well for you, and you’ll never suffer hardships again. Take it as a souvenir of mine, and don’t lose it for anything in the world.’

After thanking her for that little box, which smelt of brimstone, the weaver started back. As he progressed, it felt as if the bundle, where

he had placed the box with the whisker of the devil, was starting to weigh more and more.

Finally, he arrived home and, after opening the bundle on the table, he found that the old woman's box had turned into a gold ingot. There was more gold there than he would have needed to make a living for the rest of his life!

And that's how, with the money he got for the gold, he opened his weaving mill again and started to weave quality garments –shuttle goes, shuttle comes– with good wool and healthy, natural dyes. And he did not want to take advantage of workers, suppliers or his clients, paying the former a fair reward for their work, and asking the latter a fair price for his garments.

But this time all the decisions he made, although they were the same as those he had made in his previous life, mysteriously brought him profit and good fortune everywhere. It didn't take him long to find an equally kind and extremely clever wife who became a fundamental part of the weaving mill –shuttle goes, shuttle comes. And, not long after, they had their first child, and everything in life smiled at them.

But that was precisely what bothered his former boss the most. Although he wanted to continue competing with him, he found that his former employee did not compete with him or oppose him in any way. Finally, seeing that he could not subdue him as he had done in the past, and seeing that he was losing customers (even though the kind weaver did not intend to compete with him), the greedy weaver decided to find out the reason for his enemy's good fortune.

Through a relative of the good weaver, a not very discreet man, he found out what happened in hell, and decided that he too must get a whisker of the devil. So, as bold as brass, the malevolent merchant went to hell laden not only with shawls, but also with blankets and fine fabrics. He thought that if the other had received so much in exchange for a shawl, he would get many more talismans from the Lord of Hell himself.

So, he arrived at the gates of hell with his cargo and knocked on the door and, as had happened before, the old woman opened and

asked what he wanted. But the greedy weaver went straight into hell asking to see the Lord.

‘I’ve brought an assortment of fabrics and clothing to present to the Lord of Hell. Tell me, grandmother, where do I have to go?’

‘Aren’t you going to leave an old lady a simple shawl with which to warm herself when the cold gets into her bones?’ asked the old woman.

‘Be satisfied with what the Lord of Hell wants to give you, because, as far as I’m concerned, I’m not going to give you anything.’

And he, contemptuously, added:

‘Keep on knitting.’

‘As you wish’, said the old woman, closing the door of hell. ‘My grandson and his friends will be back soon. In the meantime, stay here with the fires.’

No one knows what happened to the greedy weaver because he was never heard from again. Some say that demons ate him and then burped and made smoke signals with his garments and fabrics. Others say that the devil himself, the old woman’s grandson used him as a footrest in front of his throne, tied with a thick chain around his neck.

Be that as it may, the truth is that no one in the small town missed him, as all the workers and the suppliers worked for, and did business with, the kind weaver.

Neither did the insects and other animals of the region miss him, much less the fish in the lagoon. □

Adapted by Grian A. Cutanda (2020).

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Comments

We had to adapt this German tale within the context of the 21st Century. This is because, in the traditional tale, the weavers were

actually butchers and the shawl that the kind weaver gives to the devil's grandmother was actually a sausage. Hopefully the wonderful German people will not be offended by this.

On the other hand, we have added environmental damage to the abuse in the workplace in the story, in order to make it fit better with the Earth Charter principle that it is intended to illustrate.

Sources

Keding, D. (2008). The Devil's Grandmother and the Two Butchers in Hell. In Keding, D. (ed.), *Elder Tales: Stories of Wisdom and Courage from Around the World* (pp. 91-93). Westport, CT: Libraries Unlimited.

Malý, M. (1988). *Dragons, Ogres & Wicked Witches*. New York: Gallery Books

Associated text of the Earth Charter

Principle 10c: Ensure that all trade supports sustainable resource use, environmental protection, and progressive labour standards.

Other passages that this story illustrates

Principle 6d: Prevent pollution of any part of the environment and allow no build-up of radioactive, toxic, or other hazardous substances.

Principle 7: Adopt patterns of production, consumption, and reproduction that safeguard Earth's regenerative capacities, human rights, and community well-being.

Principle 7d: Internalize the full environmental and social costs of goods and services in the selling price, and enable consumers to

identify products that meet the highest social and environmental standards.

Principle 9a: Guarantee the right to potable water, clean air, food security, uncontaminated soil, shelter, and safe sanitation, allocating the national and international resources required.

Principle 10: Ensure that economic activities and institutions at all levels promote human development in an equitable and sustainable manner.

Principle 10a: Promote the equitable distribution of wealth within nations and among nations.

Principle 10d: Require multinational corporations and international financial organizations to act transparently in the public good, and hold them accountable for the consequences of their activities.

