

A Bassoon Lite, Please...

L' Histoire D' Bassoon Sold At

Alan Goodman
Wilson, Wyoming

The Devil sat by an old hollow tree. Business had been slow and he amused himself by counting the number of souls he had ensnared in the past.

"Heh, heh," he chuckled. "The unsuspecting merchant from Minsk. That was a good one."

He imagined the merchant who the previous month had jumped at the chance to make a deal.

"A deal?" the merchant had asked in disbelief.

"Anything you want," the Devil assured him. "All you have to do is sign on the dotted line."

The Devil smiled remembering the look of greed that overcame the merchant as he examined the document handed him.

"Can you put my competitor in Minsk – that miserable wretch – Hiram Kvetch out of business?" The merchant looked from the document to the Devil who leaned casually against the dry brown trunk of the tree.

"A snap of my fingers and the unsuspecting Kvetch is in the poorhouse," the Devil assured the merchant.

The Devil basked in the glow of ensnaring the merchant with eternal damnation in Hell when he heard footsteps. He peeked around the tree trunk in time to see a traveler climbing the path that led towards his resting place. All thoughts of the merchant from Minsk faded.

"Hello, nice day isn't it?" the Devil greeted the traveler.

"Sure is," the traveler replied. "You wouldn't happen to know where this path leads, would you?"

The Devil could hardly suppress his glee.

"Why, it leads to wherever you are going."

The traveler, a young man, ran the sleeve of his shirt across a damp brow and slipped the heavy pack he was carrying off his shoulders. Dust rose when the pack fell to the bare ground.

"Hot today," the man said.

"Oh, yes. Yes indeed," the Devil replied. "It's been hot like this for many days. Many days indeed. It's cooler over here in the shade. Would you care to join me?"

The Devil indicated with a sweep of one arm some green moss growing up against the north side of the tree.

"Thank you," said the man, lifting the heavy rucksack from the path and taking a seat next to the Devil.

After a few moments of conversation the young man revealed he was a soldier on his way home after years away in a faraway place. The soldier opened his

rucksack and took out several pieces of wooden tubing with metal parts attached.

"What's that?" asked the Devil.

"This is a bassoon," said the soldier.

"Never heard of it," the Devil said. "What's it for?"

The soldier put the differing pieces of wood together and opened a small square box. The Devil peered over the soldier's shoulder and watched in amazement as the soldier put one of two smaller pieces of wood, about two inches long, in his mouth and produce a cackling sound.

"Bassoon reed," the soldier explained.

"Bassoon reed?"

"Yes. Bassoon reed," the soldier repeated. He placed the reed on a short metal tube coming out of the top of the bassoon. "The reed makes the vibration that produces a sound for the bassoon."

"Oh, how nice," the Devil said, wishing he might take back the pleasantries after hearing sounds coming from the instrument. "That's very, very ... peculiar."

"Yes, it is," said the soldier.

"Look," said the Devil. "I don't want to seem too nosy, but isn't there anything you would like in life? Something you might wish for?"

The soldier continued to play his bassoon and didn't reply. The Devil, chagrined by being ignored and wanting to get the soldier to stop playing so he could get his hands from over his ears, tried again.

"Excuse me," the Devil called out over the discordant sounds of the bassoon. "If you could wish for anything in the world, what would it be?"

After a few moments, the soldier stopped playing the bassoon and looked at the disheveled old man with the odd manic gleam in his eye and the small horns growing from the top of his head.

"Well, I haven't seen my girlfriend in several years," he said. "My mother needed a new roof on her house when I left home. The cow died while I've been gone. My father has been out of work I hear. The Tsar has raised taxes on the village. Floods carried away all the chickens and pigs so no one has much to eat. The winters have been so cold there is not enough firewood to go around..."

"Yes, yes, yes, yes," the Devil kept saying after each of the soldier's thoughts.

"... The family's only plow broke. The horse died. The barn burned down. Sister needed an expensive operation..."

"Yes, yes, yes..."

“But,” the soldier said, hesitating. “Right now, I think I’d like to play a couple of more songs on my bassoon.”

The soldier began to play again, but was interrupted by the Devil.

“Look, “ the Devil said. “Be reasonable. Wouldn’t you like to be the richest man in the world? Maybe, even have your very own symphony orchestra with musician slaves doing your every bidding?”

The soldier thought about this for a moment before putting the bassoon reed to his lips and playing another song.

“Please stop for a minute!” the Devil said, tugging on the soldier’s arm. “Please.”

“I’m just getting warmed up,” the soldier said, putting the reed back between his lips. He continued playing one horribly out of tune song after another, stopping only to take breaths here and there.

“Mercy,” cried the Devil. “Have you no mercy to go with your lack of musical ability?”

“Here, let me play some Elvich Preslikovsky for you,” the soldier said, launching into a thoroughly forgettable rendition of ‘Lovinskime Tenderakoff.’”

“Oh, my Heavens,” the Devil said. “Help. Won’t someone help? Please, I’ll give you anything if you just stop playing on that thing – anything.”

The soldier stopped playing and looked at the Devil writhing on the ground with his hands clamped over his ears.

“Well, how about a new roof for the house?”

“Done,” said the Devil.

“And work for Dad.”

“You got it,” said the Devil.

“Aaaaand, a pig, chickens, a cow, maybe two cows, a new plow, firewood, a barn, an operation for Sis...”

“Done, done, done...” said the Devil after each request.

“I’d like my girlfriend here next to me...”

Suddenly a beautiful young girl appeared next to the soldier and embraced him.

“And one last request,” said the soldier, one arm around his girlfriend.

“Anything. Anything at all. Just don’t play the bassoon anymore.”

“Hold this,” the soldier said, handing the bassoon to the Devil.

He picked up his rucksack, took the hand of his girlfriend and walked off.

“Hey, you forgot your bassoon,” the Devil called out.

The soldier and his girl stopped to look back at the Devil, still holding the bassoon by the hollow old tree.

“Keep it. I don’t want it,” the soldier called out.

“You don’t want it?” the Devil asked. “Why not?”

“I never could get the thing to play in tune,” the soldier said. “The man who sold it to me called it an instrument fit for the Devil.”

The Devil watched as the soldier and his girlfriend grew smaller and smaller. He looked down at the bassoon in his hands and thought of the terrible sounds the instrument made in the hands of the soldier.

“My mother was right,” he sighed, looking to the distant hill where the soldier and his girlfriend were disappearing from sight. “It’s times like this I realize I should have listened to her and gone to medical school.”