

Mother Faces the Shaitan

or

Healing Laughter

“Der Teufel ist ein saurer Geist. – The devil is a sour spirit.”
Martin Luther

IF I CAN JUST GET MY HANDS ON HIM, I’LL HIT HIM ON THE HEAD WITH MY FRYING PAN!” Mother exclaimed, bustling into the kitchen.

“What happened this time?” Father asked, following her in. Gordon put down his book to give his attention to Mother’s answer.

“Ah, it’s that Shaitan again!” she growled, putting down her shopping bag. “Arlene and Christoph are leaving the Community because someone made a comment about Arlene’s cooking! It is foolish. That Shaitan is really working overtime!”

Mother had a point. Over the last years the Community had gone from a thoughtful, helpful, unified group, to a factious, self-interested bunch of individualists. Their effectiveness in the town at large was no longer what it was. Several of the newer members had proclaimed that their methods were better and had gone off to start their own groups that were in competition with the Community. Twisted truths, false reports and nasty rumors abounded and the turnover of those who came from the Outside to help the Community was greater than ever.

Gordon’s parents were some of the oldest members of this Community and they had witnessed the early unity that was now weakened. Mother and Father were always clear that the Shaitan was behind it, but what exactly this entity was, Gordon had yet to figure out. Was it a person who spread lies and rumors, or was it some kind of a spirit being that whispered in the ears of the Members? Either way, Mother was often fed up with its activities and so she threatened it with her pan, an instrument she was very skilled at using both on and off the stove.

Mother didn’t have the look of a heroine. While attractive, she was short and growing older, her once-black, then-gray hair now henna-colored. Her watery hazel eyes could be soft and laughing behind her glasses, but now they were strong and hard as she waxed eloquent over the vile tricks the Shaitan was playing on her beloved Community.

Gordon let her talk. There was nothing they could do anyway. No one knew where the Shaitan lived, or where it appeared from when it did its insidious work.

Father said they could always pray, but Gordon wondered how much that helped. At night he sometimes felt the cloying nearness of something utterly evil and he would pull his covers up over his head and whisper out prayers to the Savior, but they didn’t seem to help. Then there were times when he had to deal with the Authorities and their demands, or he had to sift the truths he told his local friends and his stomach would compress. He did not know what to do, and despite his prayers, his stomach always seemed to get worse.

THEN IT HAPPENED. Two days after this latest interchange Gordon, his brother, Leon, and Mother were at home for lunch when his younger brother said the fateful words.

“Mourad told me he knows where the Shaitan lives.” Leon’s big blue eyes sparkled.

“Really?” Mother said in that light tone that said she was listening, but didn’t quite believe what her son was saying.

"Yeah, they say he lives down at the old castle by the river!" The boy began gesturing. "It's a real creepy place. Mourad went down there and he *saw* it."

"Mourad *saw* the Shaitain?" Gordon scoffed. "Right!"

"He did, he did!" Leon replied, excited. "It was like a man and then it turned into a big black thing and went into the castle."

"Is it now?" Mother asked and her tone was dead serious. Gordon looked up to find her lined face set, a small smile just tugging at the edges of her lips. A chill ran down his back.

"Shall we visit it, Gordon?" she asked, fixing him with her sharp eyes. He looked back at her, chills running down his spine. Was she serious? Oh, yes, she was serious and that scared him. Gordon was a strapping enough fellow to stand between his frail mother and any human who might harm her, but taking on the Shaitan? No human was brave enough to do *that*! But it wouldn't be right for Mother to go alone. Father would have gone with her and the two of them together might have a chance, but he was away Outside and would not be back for a day or two.

"All right," he muttered, his bowels squirming as if they'd been turned into a dozen snakes.

"Good," Mother exclaimed and grabbed her heavy cast-iron skillet. "Let's finish eating and then we'll go."

That was easier said than done. Being the cautious, thoughtful person that she was, Mother insisted on packing a satchel with some staples, nice little snacks, two water bottles, and useful things like a blanket and some matches. Lastly, she added her heavy cast-iron skillet to the mix and Gordon shouldered the bag.

IT WAS A LITTLE LESS THAN A TWO HOURS' HIKE FROM THEIR HOME TO THE OLD CASTLE. The sun was westering by the time they reached the old, crumbled walls. Mother set Gordon to making up a fire-ring from some of the old stones in the courtyard, while she collected some wood. By the time the sun was down they had a merry fire going and Mother was frying up some fresh tomatoes and scrambled eggs in her big skillet. She told stories of her childhood during the war and talked about how many times she had been afraid.

"I can't believe that," Gordon exclaimed.

"Oh, yes, it's true," Mother pointed out. "God forgive me, I'm a poor sinner." She fixed him with a tender gaze. "There are times when your Spirit is strong, son, but your body betrays you. It's like that with your stomach. It's the nerves in our family. I have that, too, but it has gotten less over the years."

"As you learned to trust God more?" Gordon asked.

"Yes." Mother nodded emphatically, prodded the eggs and turned them. "Now I wonder when that Shaitan will get here."

With those words Gordon's stomach tingled again. Cooking out with Mother was one thing, but confronting something as amorphous as the Shaitan scared him, especially that Mother went *looking* for the thing!

"It won't come," he managed to press out and dug in the satchel for a loaf of bread.

"Oh, yes, it will," Mother replied. "And then I will tell it a thing or two!"

"What exactly will you tell me?" came a voice from the darkness behind them. A wave of revulsion and fear licked up Gordon and then fell in a tingling shower from his scalp to his toes. Mother smiled and stood up straight, facing the dark where the voice had come from.

"I will tell you that you have done enough to our Community!" she cried into the darkness. "I will tell you that you've been defeated and you should leave us alone to do the Work God has for us!"

"Now why would I do that?" the evil voice replied. "I enjoy playing with you far too much." The darkness began to coalesce into a shape maybe eight feet tall. Wing-like clouds formed around a hideously twisted body and two malevolent, yellow eyes gazed down on the little woman.

Mother climbed to her feet and grabbed the skillet from the fire, sending the eggs and tomatoes into the flames.

"That is enough, Shaitan!" she exclaimed. "You will leave us alone."

"I will play with you," the Shaitan replied with a deep laugh, "then I will destroy you, one by one. I will begin with you!" It stooped towards Mother and the fire flickered out.

"No!" A strangled cry escaped from Gordon's lips and he tried to rise, tried to fling himself between his beloved mother and the monster, but he could not move.

Mother stood, tall and firm, and as the darkness of the Shaitan bent to envelop her, she was standing in full light. The fire was gone. Gordon could not tell where the light came from, unless it was from within Mother. He could see the great, yellow eyes bearing steadily closer to the shining figure and thought he could see an even blacker maw with amber fangs flash in the darkness.

Then, suddenly there was a loud clang and the thing reared back.

"I told you that if I saw you I would hit you on the head with my pan!" Mother exclaimed. "Now leave us alone!"

The beast had taken on more form now and it looked more repulsive than ever, if it weren't for the look of stupefied rage that crossed its ugly face. And Gordon started to chuckle. The Shaitan glanced down at him and roared. In that instant another loud clang erupted and the Shaitan sat back on its rump, turning its gaze towards Mother who was now standing with both hands on her hips and a satisfied smile on her face. She'd actually *thrown* her skillet at the thing's head! The look of complete bewilderment on the monster's face was too much for Gordon. He looked at it and laughed with deep, releasing, joyful, righteous laughter. It bubbled up and flowed over, uncontained, thrilling and healing. As he laughed his bowels stopped squirming.

Mother looked over at him.

"I think you understand now," she said and bent to retrieve her skillet, now cracked from the impact of the Shaitan's skull.

"I'm tired," she said with finality. "Let's go home." Gordon picked up the half-packed satchel, threw it on his shoulder and marched after his mother, leaving the Shaitan sitting there on the ground, still totally befuddled at what had happened. Mother marched on ahead, clutching her skillet as her trophy.

WHILE THE ATTACKS OF THE SHAITAN DID NOT DIMINISH – no, they even seemed to increase after its humiliation by a little woman with enough courage to stare it down and laugh in its face – they now had little effect on Gordon. He told the story to the Community, which resulted in more of that liberating, healing laughter, not just for him but for many who listened. Relationships were healed and when the Shaitan tried to do his worst to Gordon or to his friends, they remembered the image of a little, old lady throwing her skillet in the monster's face and the consternation it caused the beast.

As for Mother's skillet, Father bought her a new one when he returned and the cracked one was hung on the kitchen wall as a reminder that true laughter is a powerful weapon against the wiles of the Shaitan.

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