The Devil and His Grandmother

It was a great war, and the king had many soldiers, but he paid them little, so that they could not live on it. So three of them banded together and wanted to desert. One said to the other, "If we are caught, they will hang us from the gallows tree: how shall we manage?" The other said, "See that great cornfield over there, if we hide there, no one will find us: the army may not enter it and must march on tomorrow." They crawled into the corn, but the army did not march on, but lay encamped all around. They sat two days and two nights in the corn and had such great hunger that they had almost died: but if they went out, death was certain. Then they said, "What good is our deserting to us, we must die miserably here." Just then a fiery dragon came flying through the air, he descended to them and asked why they had hidden there. They answered, "We are three soldiers, and have deserted because our pay was low: now we must starve to death here, if we stay lying down, or we must dangle from the gallows, if we go out." "Will you serve me for seven years," said the dragon, "then I will lead you through the middle of the army, so that no one shall catch you?" "We have no choice and must accept it," they answered. Then the dragon seized them in his claws, led them through the air over the army and set them down again on the earth far away; but the dragon was none other than the Devil.

He gave them a little whip and said, "If you whip and crack it, so much money will jump around before you as you demand: you can then live like great lords, keep horses and ride in carriages: but after the seven years have passed, you are mine." Then he held out a book to them, in which all three had to sign their names. "But I will," he said, "first give you a riddle; if you can guess it, you shall be free and released from my power." Then the dragon flew away from them, and they traveled on with their little whips, had money in abundance, had gentlemen's clothes made and roamed about the world. Wherever they were, they lived in joy and glory, rode in horses and carriages, ate and drank, but did no evil. Time passed quickly for them, and as the seven years drew to a close, two of them grew mightily afraid and anxious, but the third took it lightly and said, "Brothers, fear nothing, I haven't fallen on my head, I'll guess the riddle." They went out into the field, sat there, and the two made sorrowful faces. Then an old woman came by, who asked why they were so sad. "Alas, what is it to you, you cannot help us anyway." "Who knows," she answered, "just trust me with your sorrow." Then they told her they had been the Devil's servants, for almost seven years, he had conjured money for them like hay, but they had signed themselves over to him, and were forfeit to him, if they could not solve a riddle after the seven years. The old woman said, "If you are to be

helped, one of you must go into the forest, there he will come upon a collapsed rock wall that looks like a little house, he must enter it, then he will find help." The two sad ones thought, "That won't save us," and stayed sitting, but the third, the merry one, set off and went so far into the forest until he found the rock hut. But in the little house sat a stone-old woman, who was the Devil's grandmother, and asked him where he came from and what he wanted here. He told her everything that had happened, and because she liked him well, she had pity and said she would help him. She lifted up a great stone that lay over a cellar, and said, "Hide there, you can hear everything that is spoken here, just sit still and do not stir: when the dragon comes, I will question him about the riddles: he tells me everything; and then pay attention to what he answers." At twelve o'clock at night the dragon came flying and demanded his food. The grandmother set the table and brought drink and food, so that he was content, and they ate and drank together. Then she asked him in conversation how the day had gone, and how many souls he had got. "It didn't quite succeed for me today," he answered, "but I have grabbed three soldiers, they are surely mine." "Yes, three soldiers," she said, "they have something about them, they may yet escape you." The Devil said scornfully, "They are mine, I will give them one more riddle, that they can never guess." "What kind of riddle is that?" she asked. "That I will tell you: in the great North Sea lies a dead sea-cat, that shall be their roast: and from a whale the rib, that shall be their silver spoon: and an old hollow horse's hoof, that shall be their wine glass." When the Devil had gone to bed, the old grandmother lifted the stone and let the soldier out. "Have you taken good note of everything?" "Yes," he said, "I know enough and will help myself." Thereupon he had to go back to his companions by another way, secretly through the window and in all haste. He told them how the Devil had been outwitted by the old grandmother and how he had heard the solution of the riddle from him. Then they were all merry and in good spirits, took the whip and struck themselves so much money that it jumped around on the earth. When the seven years were completely over, the Devil came with the book, showed the signatures and said, "I will take you with me to hell, there you shall have a meal: if you can guess what kind of roast you will get to eat, then you shall be free and loose and may also keep the little whip." Then the first soldier began, "In the great North Sea lies a dead sea-cat, that will surely be the roast." The Devil grew angry, made "hm! hm! hm!" and asked the second, "But what shall your spoon be?" "From a whale the rib, that shall be our silver spoon." The Devil pulled a face, growled again three times "hm! hm! hm!" and said to the third, "Do you also know what your wine glass shall be?" "An old horse's hoof, that shall be our wine glass." Then the Devil flew away with a loud cry and had no more power over them: but the three kept the little whip, struck out money, as much as they wanted, and lived contentedly until their end.