

Which of the Nine?
by Maurus Jokai



Once upon a time in the city of Budapest there lived a poor shoemaker who simply couldn't make ends meet. Not because people had suddenly decided to give up wearing boots, not because shoes were sold at half price, not because his work was not satisfactory. Indeed, the good man did such excellent work that his customers actually complained that they couldn't wear out anything he had once sewn together. He had plenty of customers who paid him promptly and well enough; not one of them had run away without settling his bill. And yet Cobbler John couldn't make both ends meet.

The reason was that the good Lord had blessed him with nine children, all of them as healthy as acorns. Then one day his wife died. Cobbler John was left alone in this world with nine children. Two or three were going to school; one or two were being tutored; one had to be carried around; gruel had to be cooked for the next; another had to be fed; the next one dressed; yet another washed. And on top of all this he had to earn a living for all of them. Verily, brethren, this was a big job--just try it in case you doubt it.

When shoes were made for them, nine pairs had to be made all at once; when bread was sliced, nine slices had to be cut all at one time. When beds were made ready, the entire room between window and door became one single bed, full of little and big blonde and brunette heads.

The good man often sighed, while even after midnight he still worked and hammered away at his last in order to feed the bodies of so many souls, stopping occasionally to chide now one, now another who was tossing restlessly in a dream. Nine they were--a round number nine. But still there was no cause for complaint, because all nine were healthy, obedient, beautiful, and well behaved, and blessed with sound bodies and stomachs. And rather should there be nine pieces of bread than one bottle of medicine. It was already fated that all nine of them should fight their way through life. Neither rain nor snow nor dry bread would ever hurt them.

On Christmas Eve, Cobbler John returned late from his many errands. He had delivered all sorts of finished work and had collected a little money, which he had to use to buy supplies and to pay for the daily needs. Hurrying home he saw stands on every street corner, loaded with golden and silver lambs and candy dolls, which pushcart women were selling as gifts for well-behaved children. Cobbler John stopped before one or two of the carts. Maybe he ought to buy something! What? For all nine? That would cost too much. Then for just one? No, he would give them another kind of Christmas present; a beautiful and a good one, one that would neither break nor wear out, and which all could enjoy and not take away from each other. "Well, children! One, two, three, four...are you all here?" he said when he arrived home within the circle of his family of nine. "Do you know that this is Christmas Eve? A holiday, a very gay holiday. Tonight we do not work, we just rejoice!"

The children were so happy to hear that they were supposed to rejoice that they almost tore down the house.

"Wait now! Let's see if I can't teach you that beautiful song I know. It's a very beautiful song. I have saved it to give to you all for a Christmas present."

The little ones crawled noisily into their father's lap and up on his shoulders and waited eagerly to hear the lovely song.

"Now what did I tell you? You are good children, just stand nicely in line. There--the bigger ones over here and the smaller ones next to them." He stood them in the row like organ pipes, letting the two smallest ones stay on his lap.

"And now--silence! First I sing it through, then you join in." Taking off his green cap and assuming a serious expression, Cobbler John began to sing the beautiful melody: "On the blessed birth of our Lord Jesus Christ..."

The bigger boys and girls learned it after one singing, though the smaller ones found it a bit more difficult. They were always off key and out of rhythm. But after a while they all knew it, and there could be no more joyous sound than when all the nine thin little voices sang together that glorious song of the angels on that memorable night. Perhaps the angels were still singing it when the melodious voices of nine innocent souls prayed for an echo from above. For surely there is gladness in heaven over the song of children.

But there was less gladness immediately above them. There a bachelor was living all by himself in nine rooms. In one he sat, in the other one he slept, in the third one he smoked his pipe, in the fourth one he dined, and who knows what he did in all the others? This man had neither wife nor children but more money than he could count. Sitting in room number eight that night, this rich man was wondering why life had lost its taste. Why did his soft spring bed give him no peaceful dreams? Then from Cobbler John's room below, at first faintly but with ever increasing strength, came the strains of a certain joy-inspiring song. At first he tried not to listen, thinking they would soon stop. But when they started all over again for the tenth time, he could stand it no longer. Crushing out his expensive cigar he went down in his dressing gown to the shoemaker's flat.

They had just come to the end of the verse, when he walked in. Cobbler John respectfully got up from his three-legged stool and greeted the great gentleman.

"You are John the Cobbler, aren't you? the rich man asked.

"That I am, and at your service, Your Excellency. Do you wish to order a pair of patent-leather boots?"

"That isn't why I came. How very many children you have!"

"Indeed I have, Your Excellency, little ones and big ones. Quite a few mouths to feed!"

"And many more mouths when they sing. Look here, Master John, I'd like to do you a favor. Give me one of your children. I'll adopt him, educate him as my own son, take him travelling abroad with me, and make him into a gentleman. One day he'll be able to help the rest of you."

Cobbler John stared wide-eyed when he heard this. These were big words--to have one of his children made into a gentleman. Who wouldn't be taken by such an idea? Why, of course, he'd let him have one! What great good fortune! How could he refuse?

"Well then, pick out one of them quickly, and let's get it over with," said the gentleman. Cobbler John started to choose.

"This one here is Alex. No, him I couldn't let go. He is a good student, and I need him at home. The next one? That's a girl and, of course, your Excellency doesn't want a girl. Little Fred? He already helps me with my work. I couldn't do without him. Johnny? There, there, he is named after me. I couldn't very well give him away! Joseph? He is the image of his mother--it's as if I saw her every time I look at him. This place wouldn't be the same without him. And the next is another girl, she wouldn't do. Then comes little Paul: He was his mother's favorite. Oh my poor darling would never want me to give him away. And the last two are too small, they'd be too much trouble for your Excellency." He had reached the end of the line without being able to choose. Now he started all over again; this time beginning with the youngest and ending with the oldest. But the result was still the same: He couldn't decide which one to give away because one was as dear to him as the other and he would miss them all.

"Come, my little ones--you do the choosing," he finally said. "Which one of you wants to go away to become a gentleman and travel in style? Come now, speak up! Who wants to go?"

The poor shoemaker was on the verge of tears as he asked them. But while he was encouraging them the children slowly slipped behind their father's back, each taking hold of him, his

hand, his leg, his coat, his leather apron, all hanging on to him and hiding from the great gentleman. Finally Cobbler John couldn't control himself any longer. He knelt down and gathered them all into his arms and let his tears fall on their heads as they cried with him.

"It can't be done, Your Excellency! It can't be done. Ask of me anything in the world, but I can't give you a single one of my children so long as the Lord God has given them to me."

The rich gentleman said that he understood, but that the shoemaker should do at least one thing for him; would he and his children please sing no more? And for this sacrifice he asked Cobbler John to accept one thousand florins.

Master John had never even heard the words "one thousand florins" spoken, never in all his life. Now he felt the money being pressed into his hand.

His Excellency went back to his room and his boredom. And Cobbler John stood staring incredulously at the oddly shaped banknote. Then he fearfully locked it away in the wooden chest, put the key into his pocket and was silent. The little ones were silent too. Singing was forbidden. The older children slumped moodily in their chairs, quieting the smaller ones by telling them they weren't allowed to sing any more, because it disturbed the fine gentleman upstairs.

Cobbler John himself was silently walking up and down. Impatiently he pushed aside Paul, the one who had been his wife's favorite, when the boy asked that he be taught that beautiful song because he had already forgotten how it went.

"We aren't allowed to sing any more!"

Then he sat down angrily at his bench and bent intently over his work. He cut and hammered and sewed until suddenly he caught himself humming: "On this blessed birth of our Lord Jesus Christ..." He clapped his hand over his mouth. But then all at once he was very angry. He banged the hammer down on the work bench, kicked his stool from under him, opened the chest, took out the thousand florin note and ran upstairs to His Excellency's apartment.

"Good kind Excellency, I am your most humble servant. Please take back your money! Let it not be mine, but let us sing whenever we please, because to me and my children that is worth more, much more than a thousand florins."

With that he put the note down on the table and rushed breathlessly back to his waiting family. He kissed them one after the other; and lining them up in a row just like organ pipes, he sat himself down on his low stool and together they began to sing again with heart and soul: "On the blessed birth of our Lord Jesus Christ..." They couldn't have been happier if they had owned the whole of the great big house.

But the one who owned the house was pacing through his nine rooms asking himself how it was that those people down below could be so happy and full of joy in such a tiresome, boring world as this.