

HOW JOHN BOSCOE OUTSUNG THE DEVIL

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WELL, SUH, speaking about singing, the folks down in my section of Virginnny still talk about Ol' John Boscoe and how he outsung the Devil hisself.

Now this John Boscoe, no doubt about it, was a singing fool. John was a bass singer, and he had the sweetest and the deepest bass anybody had ever listened to on this earth. There ain't never been no voice like it before nor since.

A tall black fellow—John wasn't no great big man—he was just tall and lank and sort of rangy-like. And he didn't have no great bellows of a chest like some singers; he was just tall and hollow-looking, like one of them big pipes on a pipe organ. There was nothing particular-looking about him 'cept his eyes. He had deep-sunken eyes—the eyes of a fanatic; and John was a fanatic on this bass singing business.

But as I said—no doubt about it—John was a songster from his heart; he could really sing. When he hit them high notes—and he could make 'em just as good as a tenor—his voice was as sweet and as silver-toned as a sleigh bell. Some folks say that even the birds used to shut up when John sung them sweet high notes—used to shut up and just listen, with their heads cocked on the side like they was trying to learn how to sing from Ol' John.

And when he went down the scale to them low notes, there was something in his singing just tore at your innards. John wasn't one of these basses that twisted his mouth and rolled his eyes when he made the low ones, He just opened his mouth and the music came rolling out just as natural as water over a dam; and he went down the scale so far you could feel yourself just a-throbbing and everything around you a-shaking. Even the church used to tremble and quiver when John hit them *real* low ones.

But the preacher had to caution John about that—careful-like, of course, without offending, because John Boscoe was a sensitive one and didn't take no foolishness.

Besides, the preacher knew John brought more folks to church by his singing than he did by his preaching. The whole county, white and black alike, used to come out to hear John sing. And them as couldn't get in the church could hear just as well outside or at home for that matter, but they all come to hear him, and he never sung enough for 'em. So the preacher cautioned John kinda quiet-like; he wasn't taking no chance on riling him up and running him out of the choir.

Of course, the other choir members didn't like John, because everything they sung ended in a solo for John Boscoe. He just drowned the rest of them out. Besides, John knew he was good and he made no bones about it. You could see how little he thought of the other voices by the way he looked and snorted when somebody else wanted to sing a solo. And when some of the boys asked John to sing in a quartette with them, he just looked at 'em and laughed. Yessuh, John knew how good he was and every day he showed it more and more.

In fact, Ol' John got vainer and vainer, and prouder and prouder, and harder than ever to get along with. And lie began to lose friends because his pride was taking possession of him and making him into a changed man. lie had always been a friendly, Christian sort of a man. Now he was becoming hard and bitter, with a fanatic look in his deep-set eyes. People began to avoid them eyes. John's own wife and children begun to fear him and hate to see him come in the house.

Well, the Pastor saw John changing too, so one Sunday he preached a red-hot sermon on pride. He told how the Devil got kicked out of heaven because of pride. He mentioned how Or Satan had tried to tempt Jesus through pride up there on that mountain—offering to make Him ruler of the world.

And then the Pastor brought that sermon right home to John Boscoe. He told how a man could let a voice—a voice that God had given him to do good—go to his head and turn him against his friends. And when he got to this point, he turned around and looked right at John Boscoe up there in the choir while everybody else in the church held their breath.

But it didn't register none with John. He didn't even hear what the Pastor was saying. He was just waiting for the sermon to be over so he could pump bass on the next hymn.

But John's wife didn't miss a word. Deep down she was praying it would have some effect on John. But she knew that John was so wrapped up in hisself, he hadn't heard a word. She could tell by his eyes. So, when they got home, she told John what the minister had said, starting off with a few womanish tears, about how humiliated she had been, having the Pastor preach right at her husband up there in public.

John hit the ceiling. He raved and he ranted. He damned the church and the preacher and everybody in it. He swore a great oath that he would never set foot in the church again. Who'd the preacher think he was, criticizing him? What did he care about the preacher and all the rest of them little jealous folks? He didn't need 'ern, he didn't need nobody! To hell with 'em! God damn 'ern! Well, suh, Ol' John carried on so, his wife thought he was losing his mind, and in one way he was.

After that, John's pride just took complete possession of him. He wasn't hisself no more. He'd always been a hard-working man and a good provider for his family, but he got so he didn't care whether he worked or not. He didn't care whether his family had food or not, and John's wife for the first time in her life had to take in washing to make both ends meet. John had such a terrible look in his eye she was just plain scairt to tell him how bad off they really was.

All John thought about was his singing, how good he was, and what a pity he didn't have the kind of people in the county that could appreciate him. What did these country folks know about singing? He spent days dreaming about getting away to the city, where he could give a concert to all the best singers and listeners in the world; and in his dream, he could see them all coming down the aisles of some fine hall to congratulate *him*, John Boscoe, the bass singer.

When John went to the field to plow—which he seldom did now—he spent most of his time daydreaming like that. He would stand up on a hill, and as his eyes swept over the cornfields, he would imagine all the stalks was grand folks in a fine, big city hall. He would sing to diem by the hour, and you could hear him all over the county. Sometimes, when he made them low notes, the folks even over in the next county heard him and thought It was the rumble of thunder.

John's pride as he daydreamed grew so fast it became a great big bitterness inside him. "I am the best bass singer in the county," he used to boast even before he left the church. But that was plain to everybody; no one bothered to argue about what he was

saying. No one even disputed him when he began bragging, “I’m the best bass singer in the state,” because deep down all the folks felt that too. But when John got to boasting, with that fanatic look in his eye, “I’m the best bass singer in the United States,” folks began to look at each other and get oneasy. Some of them believed that too, but they didn’t like to hear a man get so braggadocious.

But John’s pride, now a raging fire inside him, made him bolder and bolder. One Saturday, he walked into the store and announced, out of the clear blue sky, to all the folks there, “I’m the best bass singer in the whole world, and I know it.”

Well, that was just too much for the folks to swallow. So one of the men who had known John all his life spoke up sorta quiet-like. “That’s a mighty lot of territory you’re covering, John,” he said. Well, suh, this remark was like a red rag to a bull. John turned on the doubter and fixed his deep-sunk eyes on him. “In fact, I’m the best damn bass singer in the universe—including the stars above and the regions below,” John said.

That was going too far. The folks in the store that Saturday run from John Boscoe and his blasphemous talk like he was the plague. They was scairt God was a-going to cut him down, and they felt God shoulda cut him down, but they didn’t want to be around when He did. They got as far away from John Boscoe as they could get, and they stayed away.

But even though God didn’t take no notice right then of Ol’ John’s wild talk, there was somebody else who did. Ol’ Satan had had his eye on John for quite a spell. And when Ol’ John bust out with this blasphemous talk about the “stars above and the regions below,” he took it as a direct insult. It riled him.

“You hear that fool?” he said to the closest imp. “He getting ’side hisself. I’m gonna step up there and teach him a thing or two. He worsen I was when I was up in heaven.”

Then the Devil, thinking about the good old days when he was in glory, sorta sighed and said, “Pride sho is a terrible thing. Get you down quickern anything I know.”

So, pretty soon, as John Boscoe walked out in the felds by hisself, as he always was by now, he met Ol’ Satan. Even though he looked like any other dirt farmer, John knew right away it was the Devil. He felt it in his bones, and he was scairt.

But scart or not, John Boscoe was a stiff-necked one. He wasn't going to run, even from the Devil. At the same time, though, he decided to be mighty polite to Ol' Satan; he wasn't going to take no chances on riling him if he could help it.

"How de do, suh," said John pleasantly to Satan.

The Devil didn't bother to be polite, as he is most of the time. "I hear you *think* you can sing bass," he said to John, sneerified-like.

Devil or no Devil John didn't like that crack. "I don't *think* I can sing bass," John flashed right back. "I know I can sing bass—more bass than anybody—" and here he hesitated; he wasn't going to pull that universe business on the Devil, so he ended with— "anybody in the world."

"How about the universe, including the stars above and the regions below?" sneered the Devil.

Ol' John was stung right down to the quick, and forgetting everything but the great ball of pride all knotted inside him, he blurted right out, "Yessuh, I mean just that—no less!"

The Devil smiled a nasty kind of smile, and said sorta quiet and soft-like, "Then you think you can beat me singing bass?"

"That I do," answered John, drawing hisself up to his fullest height, filled with all the fanaticism of his great pride. And as he fixed the Devil with his eye, it was hard to say which had the fieriest look. The Devil didn't flinch and John didn't flinch as they stood there eyeing each other.

"You willing to put your money where your mouth is," finally asked the Devil, "or you just a *talking* and not a *betting* man?"

"I'll bet you till I can't see you," said John Boscoe angrily. "Put your money where your mouth is."

"Well, let's make it something interesting." The Devil was talking as polite as you please now, because he had John where he wanted him. "If you sing a deeper bass than I do, I'll give you anything you name. And if I beat you, I take your soul right now." Then he laughed. "Of course, I gon' get it anyhow pretty soon, but this away I can put a stop right now to all this big talk I been hearing. You ain't gonna feel like singing down in my place, I can tell you in front."

Ol' John Boscoe swelled up like a bullfrog, and glaring at Ol' Satan, he said, "I ain't the talking kind; I'm the doing kind. Let's get down to business."

"Jest a minute," the Devil said. "You ain't told me what you want in case you win. Of course, I know you ain't goin' win, but I want to keep the record straight. Will it be money or pretty women or power or all three?"

"I don't want none of them things," answered John.

"I ain't never had no money, and I been getting 'long all right. I got a good wife, and I got all the power I want—the power to sing more bass than anybody in the universe."

"Well, what *do* you want?" asked the Devil.

"If I beat you," John said, and he had that faraway look in his eye, "if I beat you—and I gon' beat you just as sure as I'm standing here—I just want you to give me one chance to sing under my conditions—to sing the way I been dreaming about."

"How is that?"

"I want a hall," said John, now on fire with the dream in him. "I want a hall that will hold a million people. I want an orchestray of one thousand pieces, with one thousand of the finest players to 'company me. And then I want a chorus of one thousand of the best singers in the world behind me to be a kinda background for me, and then I'm gonna give a concert that all the history books will write about, and all the generations that ain't yet born will talk about—the concert of John Boscoe, the greatest bass singer in the universe."

John's face was all lit up with the splendor of his dream. The Devil just said, "It's a deal; let's bind it," and with that he took out his penknife and scratched John Boscoe's arm. In his left hand suddenly appeared a contract and a pen. John signed.

"Now, that's over," said the Devil, all business. "What'll we sing?"

Quick as a flash, John answered, "*Asleep in the Deep.*"

"Agreed," said the Devil. "I like that song myself. You sing first, and beingst you ain't got a chance nohow, I'll give you three tries at it."

John began, and he sung that first pretty part—"loudly the bell in the old tower rings"—he sung it so sweet that all the angels must have been listening and envious. Then he started down the scale on the chorus where it goes "Sailor, beware; sailor, take care"—well, suh, when Ol' John hit them "bewares," you could hear him clean over in

the next state, and he was down so low the rumbling shook every house for miles around. The church steeple was shaking so hard the bell was ringing like a fire alarm. Folks knew it was John Boscoe a-singing, and though they worried about their houses falling down, they was enjoying it too much to be scairt.

But then they heard another voice when John finished, and when that second voice sung that pretty first part of the song, folks got an oneasy look in their eyes. The voice was sweet, they had to admit, sweeter even than John's, but there was something too sweet about it, kinda sinfully sweet, like tasting forbidden fruit, and it disturbed them.

Then when this second singer hit them low "beware," all hell seemed to break loose. The earth started to quiver and shake and heave and toss like a woman in labor. The trees in the woods and the houses and churches seemed to be skipping about like young lambs. The rumble was so low and so great, it was like ninety-nine earthquakes rolled into one. Some folks swear that the very ground itself opened up and you could see smack down into the fires of hell—see all the imps dancing around and clapping their hands and carrying on, 'cause they knew their Master had beaten Ol' John Boscoe.

When John Boscoe heard that last "beware" of the Devil, he knew he was whipped; he knew he was a goner unless he could get some help. There was only one place now where he could get help, and that was from on high. John was plenty scairt. He saw hell staring him in the face; he thought of all them eternal fires and the imps jabbing him with red-hot pitchforks, and he thought most how he couldn't do no singing in hell. Yessuh, John was plumb scairt and getting scairter by the minute.

Falling on his knees, he raised his eyes to God and tried to pray, but he couldn't say a word. His tongue and throat had turned to ashes, and his heart was beating like a hammer. John was so full of misery he felt he was going to bust open, but he couldn't unburden hisself; he couldn't say nary a word.

John was still thinking about John Boscoe, and the Lord—who had watched all these goings-on, as He always does—the Lord didn't want to hear no more selfish prayers. He was tired of them kind, so he just threw a handful of ashes in Ol' John's mouth. The Devil understood what had happened. He just stood there, grinning at John and gloating—and waiting.

Then John started to think about his pride and how it had brought him down to this fix he was in. For the first time in many a day, he remembered his wife and his children and what trouble he had caused them. He saw like a drowning man all they had suffered because of his pride and selfishness. Now he was going to leave them unprovided for—all because he had been a stiff-necked fool. He began to cry—not because of his fear of hell, but because he was thinking of his wife and children. His heart was moved for them, and the tears came flowing down. All of a sudden, his mouth was no longer ashes and dirt, and he could pray.

Lifting his hands and his eyes to heaven, he cried, “O Lord, I know I been a sinful and a prideful man! I know I been braggadocious and ’side myself with my own biggityness! I been mean and ornery and selfish. I done run my friends from me, I done left and damned the church, and I done deserted my own wife and children.

“And, Lord, that voice you gave me to bring souls to you, I done used to feed my own vanity and pride; I done bragged about how much I could sing and never give You no credit for it—You the one that gave me the power to sing.

“O Lord, I been wrong—I been mighty wrong. I been a fool, Lord, and I deserve all I gon’ get. Save me, Lord, if that ain’t asking too much, but if You don’t save me, look out for my wife and poor fatherless children. That’s all I ask, Lord.”

The Lord answered John—not by so many words or signs, but John knew the Lord had answered. He felt a new power within him that started at his fingertips and went singing through every vein in his body right down to his toes. His body shook and tingled like he had electricity in him, and the goodness of the Lord made him feel like he had just been shouting in church. The Lord was with him, and he knew it, and as he rose from his knees, he fixed his eye on Ol’ Satan and said kinda polite-like, “I believe I got a second chance coming to me. In fact, two more, but I don’t need the third.”

And then John Boscoe sung again. His voice at first was so natural-born sweet that folks just naturally fell on their knees and started to pray. It sounded like all the harps of heaven was playing while the morning stars was singing together. Then John took it down the scale, and when he hit that last “beware”—well, some folks say it was the deepest roll of thunder that the ear of mortal man had heard. But John—and he ought to know—said twarn’t no thunder; ’twas God’s voice all mixed up with his own voice, and the power of God was so strong within him, John said he couldn’t rightly

tell whether he was singing hisself or whether God was singing through him. And he said when he made that last real low note, he felt happy all over; he felt so good, so much at peace with the world, so free and so glorious, that he had love in his heart even for Ol' Satan.

But Satan had gone. When he heard John's last note, he knew what had happened, and Satan ain't one to be around when God is speaking. All John saw when he turned to look for the Devil was a cloud of smoke.

John Boscoe came home a humbled and a changed man that afternoon. There was no more bragging about how much he could sing. He became a model husband and the same good provider he had once been. He went back to church and to the choir, and he sung more folks to God than any fifty preachers could have brought. And he became a friend and a Christian helpmate to his brothers in the county. He was a good steward in the vineyard of the Lord until he was gathered to the bosom of his Father.

But even now down in my section of Virginny, on quiet afternoons, when the air is hushed and still, and there ain't no sign of a cloud in the sky, you can hear what sounds like the deep rumble of distant thunder. Folks down there know it ain't no thunder. It's the voice of Ol' John Boscoe singing up in heaven, where he is the bass soloist in the senior choir—a choir of a thousand angel voices with an orchestray of a thousand harps—the choir that sings around the throne of the Almighty.