

*Tales from Russian Folklore*

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ALMA CLASSICS

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## THE THIEVING PEASANT

There once was an old woman who had two sons. One died, and the other went off to a distant land. Three days after her son had left, a soldier arrived and said:

“Granny, let me spend the night.”

“Come in, my dear! Where are you from?”

“I am a Nikonets, granny – I come from the other world.”

“Oh, my dear! You know my little sonny is dead. Did you see him?”

“Of course I saw him. He and I lived in the same room.”

“You don’t say!”

“He tends cranes in that world, granny.”

“Oh, my dear, you and he must have been so tired.”

“We were exhausted! You see, granny, those cranes kept wandering through the dog-rose.”

“I suppose his clothes were worn out?”

“They were really worn out, entirely in rags.”

“I have, my dear, about forty *arshin*\* of coarse linen and about ten roubles in cash. Take them to my son.”

“It’ll be a pleasure, granny!”

Before long, her son arrived home.

“Greetings, Mother!”

“While you were away a Nikonets from the other world called in and gave me news of your dead brother. They lived together in one room. I sent him back with some coarse linen and ten roubles in cash.”

“If that is so,” said her son, “goodbye Mother! I shall go through the wide world, and if I find someone stupider than you I shall look after you; otherwise I shall throw you out of the house.”

He turned around and went away.

He came to a manorial village and stopped near the manor house. A pig with its piglets was wandering in the yard. The peasant knelt on the ground and bowed to the pig. The *barin*’s wife\* saw this from the window and said to her maid:

“Go and find out why the peasant is bowing.”

“Hey peasant,” said the maid. “Why do you kneel and bow to the pig?”



“Dear woman! Tell the lady that that spotted pig of yours is my wife’s sister. My son is getting married tomorrow, and I would like to invite the pig. Will she allow the pig to come to the wedding, and the piglets to join in the ceremonial procession?”

When the *barin*’s wife heard about this she said to the maid:

“What a fool! He invites a pig to a wedding, even with its piglets. Well, what nonsense! Let people make fun of him. Go and dress the pig in my fur coat, and have a pair of horses harnessed to the cart, so that he does not have to go to the wedding on foot.”

They harnessed the horses to the cart, placed the dressed-up pig and piglets in it, and gave it to the peasant. He climbed into the cart and drove home.

The *barin* had been out hunting, and now arrived home. His wife met him, holding her sides with laughter.

“Oh, my dear! As you were away I had no one to share a laugh with. A peasant was here. He bowed to our spotted pig and said it was his wife’s sister. He invited it to go to his son’s wedding, and the piglets to join in the ceremonial procession.”

“I suppose you gave them to him,” said the *barin*.

“I let them go, my dear! I dressed the pig in my fur coat and gave him the cart with a pair of horses.”

“Where was the peasant from?”

“I don’t know, my dear.”

“It seems it is not the peasant who is a fool, but you.”

The *barin* was angry that his wife had been deceived. He ran from the house, mounted his pacer and galloped off in pursuit.

The peasant heard the *barin* in pursuit. He took the horses and cart to a thick forest, removed his cap, turned it upside down on the ground and sat down next to it.

“Hey you, beard!” cried the *barin*. “Did you see a peasant ride past here with a pair of horses and a pig and piglets in the cart.”

“How could I not have seen him! He passed a long time ago now.”

“In what direction? How can I catch him?”

“It would be easy to catch him, but the road is very winding. Be careful you don’t lose your way. I suppose you don’t know this road.”

“You go, brother, and catch him for me!”

“No, *barin*, that would be quite impossible! There’s a falcon sitting under my hat.”

“It doesn’t matter, I shall look after your falcon.”

“Be careful not to let it go. It’s a valuable bird. My master would have me killed.”

“How much does it cost?”

“Three hundred roubles.”

“If it escapes I shall pay.”

“No, *barin*, you may promise now, but I don’t know what would happen.”

“You don’t trust me! Well, here are three hundred roubles just in case.”

The peasant took the money, mounted the pacer and galloped to the forest. The *barin* stayed to guard the empty cap.

The *barin* waited for a long time. The sun began to set, but still there was no sign of the peasant. “Wait,” he thought. “I shall look to see if there’s a falcon under the cap. If there is, then he will come. If not, there will be nothing to wait for!” He raised the cap, and realized there had never been a falcon. “What a swine! This surely was the same peasant who deceived my wife!” The *barin* spat from vexation and trudged back to his wife. As for the peasant, he had long since been back home.

“Well, Mother dear,” he said to the old woman, “live with me. There is indeed someone in the world stupider than you. Just like that, we have acquired a troika of horses and cart, three hundred roubles in cash and a pig with piglets.”

## THE NIGHTMARE

In a certain kingdom, in a certain land, lived a sailor. He served the tsar faithfully and always conducted himself well, and for that reason the authorities came to know of him. One day he set out from his ship to go to town. He put on his sailor’s uniform and went to a tavern. He sat down at a table and ordered wine and things to eat. He ate, drank and enjoyed himself. He had ten roubles’ worth of food and drink, and then kept on ordering more, asking now for one thing, now for another.

“Listen, sailor,” the waiter said to him, “you are ordering a lot, but will you be able to settle the bill?”

“Hey, brother, you shouldn’t worry about getting paid: I’m rolling in money.”

Straight away he pulled gold from his pocket, threw it on the table and said:

“Take this!”

The waiter took the gold, calculated all that was owing and brought the change. But the sailor said to him:

“Never mind the change, brother! Take it as a tip for yourself.”

The next day again the sailor obtained leave. He called in at the same tavern and again ordered food and drink and paid with gold. He did this a third day too. Then he started to go there regularly, paying each time with gold and giving the change to the waiter as a tip. The innkeeper himself began to notice him, and started to wonder: “What could this mean? The sailor is nothing out of the ordinary, but he sure knows how to throw his money around! He must have a coffer full of gold! I know what a sailor’s salary is, and you certainly wouldn’t be able to enjoy such luxury on that! He probably cleaned out the treasury somewhere. I have to inform the authorities about this. Who knows, he may get himself into such trouble that he will never be able to pay off his debts, and may even get sent to Siberia.”

So the innkeeper reported the matter to an officer, who told the general himself. The general summoned the sailor.

“Tell me,” he said, “in all honesty, where did you get the gold?”

“You can find a lot of gold like this in any cesspit!”

“Why do you talk nonsense?”

“I do not talk nonsense, Your Excellency! And I do not lie. It is the innkeeper who lies. Let him show you the gold that he received from me.”

The coffer was immediately brought, opened, and was seen to be crammed full of bones.

“So how did it happen then, brother, that you paid with gold, but bones came to be here? Will you show us how you did this?”

“Oh, Your Excellency! Surely death is coming to us.”

They looked and saw water gushing through the windows and doors. It rose higher and higher, until it nearly reached their throat.

“My God!” said the general in fright. “What on earth can we do now? Where can we go?”

The sailor replied: “If you don’t want to drown, Your Excellency, then climb after me up the chimney.”

So they climbed. They clambered up to the roof and stood and looked around: the whole town was flooded! It was such an inundation that in the lower parts houses could not be seen at all. And still the water was rising, rising.

“Well, brother,” said the general, “truly, even you and I will not survive!”

“I don’t know. What will be... will be!”

“My death is coming!” thought the general. He did not look well; he just sat saying his prayers.

Suddenly, as if from nowhere, a skiff came sailing by. It caught on the roof and stopped there.

“Your Excellency,” said the sailor, “get into the skiff and we shall sail away. We may survive, perhaps the waters will recede.”

They sat in the skiff and were carried over the water by the wind. They sailed for a day, then another, and on the third day the water level began to fall. It fell so quickly that they did not know where it had gone. All around it grew dry. They climbed out of the skiff and asked some people they met what that place was called – and had they been carried far? They learnt they had been carried beyond the thrice-ninth land, to the thrice-tenth kingdom, where all the people were unknown. What could they do? How could they get back to their own land? They had no money, and no way of supporting themselves.

The sailor said: “We have to get jobs as workers and make some money. Without that we can do nothing, and shall never return home.”

“It’s all right for you, brother! You have long been accustomed to work. But what about me? You yourself know that I’m a general. I don’t know how to work.”

“It doesn’t matter. We shall find such work as does not require skill.”

They trudged through the village and got jobs as shepherds. The local people accepted them and employed them for the whole summer. The sailor went as the senior shepherd, and the general as a shepherd boy. In that way they grazed the village herds until autumn. They received payment from the peasants and set about sharing it.

The sailor divided the money equally, giving the general as much as he took for himself. The general saw that the sailor considered himself his equal, and took offence.

“How can you compare yourself to me? After all, I am a general, while you are just a simple sailor!”

“On the contrary, I should divide the money in three, and take two parts for myself. Even one part would be enough for you. Remember, I was a real shepherd, while you were just a shepherd boy.”

The general grew angry, and started to swear at the sailor. But the sailor stood firm. At last he swung his arm and punched the general in the side: “Wake up, Your Excellency!”

The general opened his eyes and looked. He was in his room, and everything was as before. It was as if he had never left it! He no longer had the desire to punish the sailor; he released him, and the innkeeper was left with nothing.

## THE SLANDERED MAIDEN

In a certain kingdom, in a certain land, lived a merchant and his wife. They had two children, a son and a daughter. The daughter was of such a beauty as cannot be conceived or imagined, only told about in tales. In time, the merchant's wife fell ill and died. Soon after, the merchant too was taken ill, and so seriously that he did not expect to recover. He summoned his children and said to them:

“My dear children! I shall soon be leaving the world; death is already standing by my shoulder. I bless you with all my heart. Live after me in harmony and respect. You, daughter, honour your brother as you do me; and you, my son, love your sister as you did your mother.”

After that, the merchant died. The children buried him and remained to live alone. They lived in love and harmony, doing everything together.

They lived thus for some time. But sooner or later the merchant's son thought:

“Why am I staying at home? I don't know anyone, and no one knows me. It would be better for me to leave. My sister can look after the house. I shall go into military service. If God protects me, I shall stay alive. After ten years I shall attain high rank and win respect from everyone.”

He summoned his sister and said to her:

“Goodbye little sister! I am going by my own wish to serve God and our great country.”

The merchant's daughter began to cry bitterly:

“God go with you, brother! I never thought you would leave me alone!”

They bade a fond farewell, exchanged portraits and promised never to forget each other.

The merchant's son enrolled as a soldier and joined the guards; he served for a month, a second, and a third, and so a year went by. He grew into a fine young man – intelligent, literate and of stately bearing – and the authorities soon learnt about him, and admired him.

Not even two years passed before he was promoted to the rank of ensign, and then to rank after rank. He was promoted to colonel and became well known to the tsar and his family, who viewed him with favour. The tsarevich thought the world of him; he considered him a friend and often rode over to visit him for a walk or a chat.

Once, the tsarevich happened to be in the colonel's bedroom and saw on the wall a portrait of a maiden so beautiful that he gasped in astonishment.

“Can it be,” he thought, “that there is such a beauty somewhere in the world?”

He looked and looked, and fell head over heels in love with the portrait.

“Tell me,” he said to the colonel, “whose portrait is this?”

“It is my own sister, Your Highness!”

“Your sister is beautiful! I could marry her right now. But wait, I shall seize the moment, tell my father, and ask his permission to marry her.”

From that time, the merchant’s son grew still higher in the estimation of the tsarevich. Whenever there was a parade or an exercise, someone might have been reprimanded, another incarcerated, but the merchant’s son received only praise and commendation. This surprised the other colonels and generals.

“What could this mean?” they asked. “From low rank, from almost peasant stock, he has risen to be the tsarevich’s favourite. How can we break off this friendship?”

They made enquiries, and in time found out all there was to know.

“All right,” said one envious general. “He may be the favourite now, but won’t be for long. He will soon be seen as the most worthless scoundrel. I shall have him driven out of the service with a bad reference.”

Having decided on a plan, the general went to the sovereign to ask for leave, saying he had to go away on a personal matter. He was granted leave and went to the town where the colonel’s sister lived. Arriving at the yard of a peasant on the outskirts, he began to question him:

“Listen, dear peasant! Tell me about a certain deceased merchant’s daughter... Does she take in guests, and whom does she know? If you tell me the truth, I shall pay you.”

“I will not sin by telling lies,” replied the peasant. “I cannot fault her, for she leads a blameless life. She lives now as she used to live with her brother, quietly and modestly. She stays even more at home and rarely comes out, only going to church on big holidays. She is clever, and so beautiful that it is thought there is not another like her in the world.”

Now the general bided his time. On the eve of a big annual holiday, as soon as the church bell began to ring for vespers and the merchant’s daughter set off for church, he ordered his horses to be harnessed, got into his carriage and drove straight to her house. At the porch, he jumped from the carriage, ran up the stairs and asked:

“Is my sister at home?”

The neighbours took him for the merchant’s son. Though he did not resemble the merchant’s son in the least, they had not seen the son for a

long time. It was getting dark, and the general was dressed in uniform, so how could they be expected to recognize the deception? They addressed him by name and patronymic and said:

“No, your sister has gone to vespers.”

“Well, I shall wait for her. Take me to her bedroom and give me a candle.”

He went to her bedroom, looked around and saw a glove lying on a table. Next to it lay a ring inscribed with her name. He seized the ring and glove, put them in his pocket and said:

“Oh, it has been so long since I saw my sister! My heart cannot bear the sadness. I cannot wait to see her. I’d better go and meet her in church.”

But he thought to himself: “I’d better get away from here fast. Who knows? If someone finds me I’ll be in trouble!”

The general ran out to the porch, got into his carriage and left town.

When the merchant’s daughter arrived from vespers her maid came to her and asked:

“Well, did you see your brother?”

“What brother?”

“The one who serves in the regiment. The one who requested leave and came to see you.”

“Where is he?”

“He was here. He waited and waited and decided to go and meet you in church. He said he couldn’t wait to see his sister!”

“He was not in church. Perhaps he called in at another place...”

The merchant’s daughter waited for her brother for an hour, then a second and a third. She waited all night, but heard nothing more about him.

“What could this mean?” she thought. “I wonder if it was a thief who dropped in here?”

She started to look around, and found that her gold ring and a glove were missing.

As for the general, he returned from leave to the capital city, and the next day together with other senior officers went to report to the tsarevich. The tsarevich came out, greeted them, issued instructions and ordered them to carry out their duties. They all dispersed – except for the general.

“Your Highness!” he said. “Allow me to speak to you in confidence.”

“Very well, speak!”

“There is a rumour that Your Highness is thinking of marrying the colonel’s sister. I dare to report that she is unworthy of you.”

“Why is that so?”

"She behaves in a most shameful manner, chasing men and throwing herself on everyone. I was in the town where she lives, and was myself tempted to sin with her."

"You lie!"

"No, Your Highness, I do not! Would you like to see these? She gave me as a keepsake her engraved ring and a pair of gloves. One of the gloves I lost on the way, but the other is here..."

The tsarevich straight away sent for the merchant's son and told him everything. The merchant's son replied:

"This cannot be true! I shall be answerable with my head! Allow me, Your Highness, to go home and discover what happened there. If the general speaks the truth, then extend no mercy either to me or my sister. But if he has slandered her, then have him punished."

"Let it be so. Go with God's blessing."

The merchant's son took leave and went home, and the rumour was spread that the tsarevich had banished him from town.

The merchant's son arrived home. Everyone he spoke to praised his sister. When she met him, she threw herself joyfully on his neck and said:

"My brother, were you here recently, or has someone been impersonating you?"

She told him in detail all that had happened.

"And what is more," she said, "a glove and my engraved ring are missing."

"Ah! Now I understand. That general has been cunning! Well, sister, tomorrow I shall go back to the capital. In two weeks, you follow me. On the day you arrive, at one o'clock, we shall have a big mounting of the guard on the square. You be there without fail at that time and appear before the tsarevich."

Everything went according to plan. On the appointed day the forces gathered on the square. The tsarevich arrived to view the mounting of the guard. Suddenly a carriage rolled up to the square and there emerged a maiden of indescribable beauty. She went straight to the tsarevich, fell to her knees, wept copious tears and said:

"I am the sister of your colonel! I beg you to condemn this general for what he did to discredit me."

The tsarevich summoned the general:

"Do you know this maiden? She makes a complaint about you."

The general goggled at her.

"Forgive me, Your Highness," he said. "I know nothing about her. I see her for the first time."



“So how could you have said to me that she gave you a pair of gloves and a golden ring? Did you steal these things?”

Now the merchant’s daughter told the tsarevich how one glove and a ring had gone missing from her house, but that the thief had not taken the other glove.

“Here it is – would you like to compare them?”

The gloves were placed side by side. They made exactly a pair! The general could do nothing but confess, and for his offence he was condemned to hang.

The tsarevich now went to his father. He was given permission to marry the merchant’s daughter, and lived with her ever after in happiness and prosperity.

## SORROW

In a certain village lived two peasants, brothers. One was poor, the other rich.

The rich brother moved to live in town. He built himself a big house and joined the merchants’ guild. But the poor brother often had not even a single piece of bread to eat. His children, each smaller than the next, wailed and begged for food. From morning till night the peasant laboured fruitlessly, but still there was nothing.

One day he said to his wife:

“I think I shall go to town, to ask my brother if he cannot help in some way.”

He came to the rich man:

“My own brother! Help me in any way to alleviate my misery. My wife and children sit at home without bread. They go for days on end with nothing to eat.”

“Spend the week working for me, then I shall help you.”

What could he do? The poor man got down to work. He cleaned the yard, groomed the horses, carried water and chopped firewood. After a week the rich man gave him a loaf of bread:

“This is for the work you have done!”

“Thanks even for that!” said the poor man. He bowed and prepared to go home.

“Wait! Do come and visit me tomorrow, and bring your wife. You see, tomorrow is my name day.”