



Folk Tales of the Russian Empire



Коллектив авторов

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«Издательские решения»

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It has long been known that the folk tale is the soul of people. Since ancient times, the Russian Empire was formed as a multi-ethnic country. The Russian language and Russian culture are the fruit of the interaction of different cultures and peoples living in the vast territory. That is why this book presents folk tales of Native peoples inhabiting Russia in different years. Each tale, presented in this book, reflects some features, typical for people of a particular nation.

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**Folk Tales of the Russian Empire
Retold, translated and illustrated
by Vladimir Slaviansky**

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Cock-The-Shah A Tatar folk tale

However, the Tatar khans continued to consider the grand princes of Moscow to be their vassals, and from time to time they still raided the territory of Moscow and indeed the city itself. Moreover, the Kazan Tatars controlled the middle Volga, frustrating the ambitions of Russia's rulers to extend their trading activities to the east.

A History of the Peoples of Siberia, by James Forsyth



A very long time ago there lived a rich peasant in a village. He had a homestead and a good house. There was a pen in his yard and there lived a brave cockerel and several hens. The cockerel was used to walking around the yard, looking to the left and looking to the right: he kept order, putting on airs and graces.

One early morning the cockerel jumped up, sat on the fence and began to yell:

“Cock-a-doodle-doo! Ku-ka-re-ku! Dear girls and ladies, you have received a great honour! Now I am not just a cock – I am Cock-The-Khan! I am Cock-The-Shah, I am Cock-The-Padishah, I am Cock-The-Sultan! My winsome chickens, my dear babies, – blackish and whitish, greyish, reddish and goldish: tell me, who is the most handsome in the world? Who is the greatest man of courage?”

Having heard him, there gathered all the chickens, – blackish and whitish, greyish, reddish and goldish. They surrounded their master – the magnificent Khan, the great Shah, the mighty Padishah, the powerful Sultan, – and began to sing:

“Cock-a-doodle-doo, oh, Magnificent Khan! Kud-ku-da, oh, Great Shah! Cock-a-doodle-doo, oh, Mighty Padishah! Kud-ku-da, oh, Powerful Sultan! No one in the world is so brave, as you are. No one in the world is so smart, as you are. There is nobody in the world as handsome as you are!”

“Cock-a-doodle-doo!” The Cock was singing louder. “Who has a colourful dress? Who has strong legs? Who has a loud voice?”

“Oh, Great Shah, you have a colourful dress. Oh, Magnificent Padishah, you have strong legs. You, the Great of the Greatest, have a voice louder than a lion!” were clucking the chickens.

The Cock inflated with pride, raised his high crest and cackled his best:

“Ku-ka-re-ku! Come to me closer and tell me loudly: who has the highest Crown on his head?”

The chickens came to the fence, bowing down before the Very Important Cock and singing:

“You have the highest Crown on your head, which is glittering like a blaze. You are our Only Shah. You are our Only Padishah!”

At that time, a fat cook had crept up to the cockerel, like a bolt out of a clear sky, and grabbed him by the neck.

“Ku-ka-re-ku! What a horrid nightmare!” cried Cock-The-Shah.

“Kud-ku-da! Where are you going?” shouted the chickens.

The cook caught the Mighty Khan by his right leg, and he killed the Great Shah with a sharp knife! The cook plucked all the variegated dress off the Powerful Padishah, and he cooked chicken soup, – that despicable cook, – from the King of Glory!

The kind folks gathered around the table, where there was a big pot of soup. They were eating and praising:

“Oh yeah, what a delicious cockerel! Quite so, what a fatty rooster!”

Kookylin the Dodger **An Eskimo folk tale**

The shamans of the American Eskimo of the nearest shore of Alaska also enjoy the respect of their Asiatic neighbors, both Maritime Chukchee and Asiatic Eskimo. In one tale a contest between two shamans – one an American, one an Asiatic – ends with a full victory for the American, although the shaman from the Asiatic shore resorts even to treachery, and is severely punished for it.

The Chukchee, by Waldemar Bogoras



There lived a man in his hut – yaranga. His name was Kookylin. He had a wife and three children. His kids had not let him lie around – they were used to eating up everything very quickly. Almost each day Kookylin went out to hunt for food, but there were few game birds at that place, and often he returned home empty-handed. In the long run, he got tired of such a life, and one day he thought:

“Well, now I might pretend to be dead, like I have already died. When they bury me, I will live alone, I will have my fill!”

One day he pretended to be ill: he fell to the ground and was lying motionless on his back. Then he said to his wife:

“When I do grow old (pass away), don’t cut my clothes. Simply take them off and put beside me. Put my weapon, a bola (a sort of sling) and a knife-cleaver, by my side. And send a pan, a pot and some meat with me. Maybe in the next world, if revive, I will need something.”

Really he had seen life not so long and then died. His wife and children shed a few tears, and then began to bury him according to the ancient custom. They brought him to a remote place. His

sons put him on the ground and covered his body with stones. They put his clothes in the grave, as he had instructed, without cutting. They left him some food, the pan, the bola, the knife and the pot. They left him alone and then went home.

When the mourners vanished over the horizon, Kookylin got up, dressed himself and began to build a cabin – nynloo. For a few days he had built the nynloo and began hunting. The man felt free and used to catch a lot of ptarmigans. Indeed, he ate his fill every day. He lived a happy life, forgetting about his old home.

And his wife would go out of the yaranga in the morning and sit on a stone in sorrow – her husband died! A little later, she would take her knife and snares and go hunting...

With the lapse of time, Kookylin stopped thinking about his family. He enjoyed in the morning, cutting meat off the ptarmigan's legs, pounding it with fat and eating to satiety. He sat by the fire in his dugout, stirring the fat with the meat in the pan and singing:

“Kookyl, Kookyl, Kookylin – I eat the fat of the land!” He was stirring and singing:

“Kookyl, Kookyl, Kookylin – oh, yea!”

Once an arctic fox saw him hunting in the tundra, and ran off down the road. At that time the wife of Kookylin was sitting at her yaranga. Suddenly she saw the arctic fox running around the corner. The woman thought:

“Why is she walking just here? It's cool!” The woman looked then: it was already not the fox but a young woman. And the fox-woman asked the wife of Kookylin:

“What are you thinking about?”

“Oh, my husband has recently died – about him and my poor children I'm thinking!”

“He didn't die – your husband! There he lives, up the road. He is alive and kicking! Not long ago I saw him hunting ptarmigans thereabout. Come on, dear, put my skin on, run and look!”

The wife of Kookylin took the skin of the fox and put it on. At the same moment she turned into a fox, and went then running up the road.

“Hey, when you take a look at your husband and be running back, pull your tail out – you'll be able to run as fast as the wind!” shouted the fox-woman.

The wife of Kookylin came to the pointed place and saw: the curling smoke was rising over a hillock. She came nearer and looked inside: her husband was in the nynloo, sitting by the fire. He had put the pan between his legs and was mixing fat with meat.

“Kookyl, Kookyl, Kookylin – oh, yea!” The man kept singing and pounding the fat with the meat.

“Hey, you there, it seems that Kookylin is dead!” shouted the woman inside the nynloo.

“Oh, no, no! I'm not dead, I am alive! Is that you, honey? Come in, dear, wait for me! I'm filled with ptarmigans, I can't run quickly. Come on, help me to drag the game birds home,” answered the man.

He looked out – there was nobody around. Only an arctic fox was running away. Kookylin took some ptarmigans and went home down the road. When he came there, his wife glanced at him, sitting in the yaranga and said:

“Hey, man, a little bird told me that Kookylin is dead!”

“No, no, dear, I'm not dead. I have caught many ptarmigans. I myself couldn't even bring them here. Help me please, we have to bring them home.”

And they began to drag over his ptarmigans. The man moved back to their yaranga and they continued to live as before. But Kookylin had not lived long; he soon became really ill and then died shortly afterwards.

Thus Kookylin the Dodger departed to that country, from which no one has ever returned.

Pugey the Trader **A Nanay folk tale**

The Nanais revered the same “master” spirits of forest, fire, river, mountains, etc. as the other Amur peoples, and the cult of the bear was an element in their religion. Living as they did within the territory of another even more formidable predator – the tiger – the Nanais, like the Udeghes and Oroches, treated it with even greater respect than the bear, and avoided killing the sacred animal if at all possible.

A History of the Peoples of Siberia, by James Forsyth



A long time ago there lived a man, Veliney, in the Nanay village of Buriken. Many years later this village gave birth to the city of Khabarovsk. Veliney was a bold and successful hunter from the tribe of Oninka. A lot of girls wanted to marry him, but he married Sedekey, the most beautiful girl from all over the neighbourhood. The largest bride price paid Veliney! Having become a wife, Sedekey used to keep their house all day long, fetching water and cooking food, sewing and mending clothes, chopping firewood and stoking a fire. Some time passed and they got a son, Surgii. When the son was growing, Veliney loved to play with him, and then little by little he began to teach him how to find tracks of wild animals in the forest, how to recognize birds by their voices, how to find the way home by the sun or the stars. Surgii was a good boy and easily adopted all the skills from his father.

Then Veliney got a younger son, Pugey. The son was growing slowly and was often sick while a child. His mother was very sorry for the kid that had been with her all the time. She did not want him to be a hunter. When Pugey grew up a little, he was sent to a parish school where he learned the Russian language and got a good understanding of reading, writing and counting.

When the elder son Surgii grew up, he became a hotshot like his father. In the vast taiga he hunted for wild boars, red and roe deers. From time to time he met a bear or a tiger and none of them was able to avoid his bullet. His fishing rods also were not lying in vain. Surgii was the best hunter and fisherman, and their home became the richest in the village. He married a nice girl and his wife then gave birth to a lovely daughter.

Thus they lived. A long time elapsed, and Veliney became old and sick. Sedekey attended her sick husband for a long time, but eventually Veliney became very ill and died. After that Sedekey lived with her children, but she did not like the daughter-in-law; she often scolded her and finally decided to find a husband for herself.

One day it happened that Sedekey befriended a Chinese. She once caroused noisily with the Chinese, and all the people learnt that they became husband and wife. The name of the Chinese was Dyfenty. He had a rank of the big banana – gasanda. With a heavy hand, he ruled the great area from Khabarovsk to Bikin.

They began to live together. The elder son Surgii would go hunting and fishing. When the younger son Pugey grew up, his stepfather Dyfenty used to take him on trips to the edge of the Amur country. On those trips, they often had to deal with different merchants. With the lapse of time, Dyfenty started a trading business together with his stepson. At the mother's instigation, Pugey gradually took all the trade in his own hands.

Then Pugey bought a big boat and began to trade in fish and furs, sailing from one village to another, from one river to the next. In ten years Pugey turned into a "big man", thick and important. The whole neighbourhood knew him, calling "Pugey the trader".

One day, Pugey set off down the river in his boat. In a secluded spot he saw a woman, one man's wife. He began talking to her, lured her into his boat and stole the woman. Then he sold her to an Udegey, that lived in the village of Chora and who was his friend.

Pugey came back home, hoping that no one could find out what happened, but his stepfather learned about his trick from a distant relative and decided to abandon Pugey and his mother. However, the woman showed her husband a magical thing that she got some time ago from a local shaman. According to his words, this thing was made from a bird and could cause a black disease and death. When Dyfenty learnt about this, he was frightened and did not dare to leave the woman. And his wife became so brave that laughed at him. They began living together again.

Time was creeping on and one day the wife of Surgii delivered a baby boy. The father was beside himself with joy when he heard the good news!

Meanwhile Pugey became "too big for his boots", that he could afford such tricks as follows. He gathered furs of all hunters and went to a Manchurian city. There he exchanged the furs for all that he needed. Having returned home from there, he took half of the gain for himself and the rest he distributed among the people. In such a way, he would cheat the illiterate Nanay hunters. Pugey became the biggest liar among the Nanay merchants!

One day, when Pugey went by boat to trade, he took three women with him. On that day he earned a very large income. On the way back, he was drunk and began to stick to one of the women.

"I saw in a dream that you were my wife," said Pugey.

"I do not want to be your wife – you are greedy," replied the woman.

"Well then, let's just sleep together – I'll give you new beads!"

"Don't want your beads!"

When she refused him, Pugey got angry, then attacked her treacherously and raped her. The next morning he got sober and realized what he had done! He was afraid of retaliation – he thought that relatives of the woman would kill him. Then he decided not to wait for revenge and stabbed all three women with a long dagger – he killed them all! When he returned home, he told everyone that the women stayed with their relatives in a remote village.

Once on the return from his trip, Pugey got drunk and went wandering around the village, – having the heebie-jeebies. From time to time he stopped in the middle of the road, telling someone that he was a smart and rich trader, but no one wanted to listen to him. In the evening he returned home, when all the people had gone to bed. Pugey sat alone drunk, shouting and showing off. As he was sitting there, a boy, son of the elder brother, woke up and started to weep. The man yelled:

“Why are you crying? I just got tired! I have no children and don’t want to have!”

Cursing like this he rushed to the boy. The boy began to cry in fear even harder. The man took the boy’s cradle and threw it on the floor. The cradle, falling to the floor, knocked down the boy. Pugey went to sleep then, as if nothing had happened. The next morning the boy was found dead. Thus Pugey killed the kid of his brother and then escaped.

The villagers did not want to believe what happened... After a while they caught Pugey. He was not able to cheat his brother and told him everything. The folks were sure that the evil spirit Orkii had possessed his soul. The old men gathered in Pugey’s house and put him on trial. In the old days, the Nanay folks conducted the trial in such a manner: many people clustered together and discussed what to do with an offender. At that meeting they decided to execute Pugey – his brother Surgii should kill him with his own hands.

The folks pointed to a small lake, which was like a swamp. It was the worst of the lakes, lonely lake, which lived for its own sake. Having got to that little lake, Surgii bound his younger brother, then killed him, and drowned him in the lake. The lake became hectic. There was blood everywhere. Surgii burst out crying – he lost his brother!

Thus died Pugey the trader.

Sin in Good Company

A Jewish folk tale

The Russian government, though it has not attempted total abolition, or banishment in six weeks, has yet attempted to curb, restrain, and put down the poor Jews, in various ways. At one time all Jews were to confine themselves to agriculture; at another time all Jews without property were to be transported to Siberia, where the government would provide them with property.

An Illustrated Description of the Russian Empire, by Robert Sears



Once upon a time there lived two wealthy Jews in a city. One of them – Elisha – was a young man with a beautiful black beard. The name of another man was Reuven – he was older, with grey hair on his head. Elisha was still naive, like many young men, but Reuven was prudent and experienced in business. These friends were merchants; they conducted their affairs together and were the complementary halves.

One day they went to a landlady, for new goods. She was a middle-aged woman, widowed some years ago. She lived alone in her estate in the countryside. For many years, Reuven and Elisha had been doing business with her, although the local people were whispering that she was a witch. This time the friends bought a lot of high-quality goods from the woman: sheepskin and wool, dried mushrooms and berries, butter and cheese, and so on. They fully paid for the commodity, packed their goods, and were ready to return home. Reuven went out to find and hire a cart, but Elisha lingered in the house to bargain about the next deal.

Elisha, a young and handsome man, had long attracted attention of the well-off widow. They were alone and the hostess invited the guest to stay in her house for a night, promising to show him

new shawls of the finest silk, which she expected to get in the morning. But Elisha rejected her offer, referring to their urgent liabilities. Then the lady ordered her servants to dish up a delicious dinner. She dressed herself in a black silk dress with a plunging neckline and asked Elisha to stay for dinner. However, Elisha did not give in to this temptation.

But at that instant, the woman's passion of love burst into flame, and she asked him to just stay a little longer and then started to change her apparels. She put on a transparent dress with delicate lace on her naked body. Then she dressed in mermaid costume with golden scales. Then she adorned her neck with a pearl necklace and put two bracelets of gold on her hands. Each time, having attired in a new dress, she spun around Elisha in a charming dance. She begged him, caressed and kissed him, burning with passion like a red-hot coal.

Elisha had nearly faltered, he was almost lost before the charms of the insidious temptress, but overcame himself and survived. However, the witch continued to force him. She sat down on his laps, opened a casket and counted half of the money, having received from the companions, and put it into his pocket. At last the woman slowly took her dress off, and only a veil still covered her sleek body! She embraced the young man, whispering burning words of love. And he couldn't remain indifferent to charms of the woman, his resistance was broken, and he threw himself at her mercy...

Two hours later the merchants were returning home. Reuven was very happy with the delicate deal: he chatted and smiled, remembering a warm reception of the welcoming lady. But he had not noticed that his companion was sitting in sorrow, staring at one point. He did not see that Elisha scarcely heard the words of his friend. Eventually, Reuven understood that his fellow was really out of it. He pestered Elisha with questions, asking him to tell what had happened, but Elisha was silent. Reuven finally felt that the case was serious and became more insistent. In the long run Elisha decided to make a clean breast of everything:

“Reuven, I must confess to you in a great sin that I have committed today.”

“Dear, you committed a sin? Enough of this, we almost never have been apart today!” replied Reuven.

“Nevertheless, I managed to make the unforgivable sin, prohibited by the seventh commandment – do not commit adultery,” said Elisha and then he told his companion all that happened to him, when Reuven was hiring the cart.

At the beginning of the conversation, Reuven could not believe his friend and was teasing him. However, when the young man took out of his pocket the money, which was exactly half of the money that they had paid to the landlady, Reuven became convinced that Elisha was telling the truth. But instead of lamenting about the companion's Fall, Reuven envied him. He burst out laughing and said that he would not mind to be in his “shoes”. However, having seen that Elisha remained gloomy, Reuven said to him:

“Listen, mate, I agree to take your sin on my soul in exchange for money, which the lady gave you back. I'll take your sin upon myself, with all the consequences!”

“Is that true? You're not kidding? I agree!” exclaimed Elisha. He handed over the money, and as a sign of agreeing on the deal, the companions affixed a ceremonial handshake...

The friends then parted their ways and had not met for a while. But a year later Elisha learned that his companion had recently died. Elisha was horrified and then he completely lost his rest and sleep. One night Elisha had a dream, where his late companion said that he ended up in Hell for the sin committed by Elisha. He demanded to cancel the deal. Two days later Elisha had another dream: he saw his companion, who again demanded to cancel their contract! After that, a soul of Reuven was coming every night to his former partner. Elisha had been quite exhausted and decided to visit a rabbi.

The rabbi called two dayans – Jewish religious judges. They gathered in the synagogue and built a curtain in the corner for a soul of the dead. In such a way, they began the trial between the living and the dead. Elisha told the court how it all happened: why Reuven persuaded him to sell the sin, and how much he paid for it. Then the rabbi turned to the side of the curtain and said:

“You, who was called Reuven! Do you accept the fact, which described your former partner? If so, what can you add to this?”

“Yes, I do,” boomed a voice from behind the curtain. “But I had not known, that I would have been punished for this!”

“You were a merchant,” continued the rabbi. “Tell me, please, did you buy this sin from your companion? You got the money for it?”

“Yes, I had bought the sin and got the money.”

“Well then, if that is so,” said the rabbi, “your case has been done with it!”

At the very moment, they heard a terrible moan from behind the curtain:

“Ah-ah-ah-ah-ah!” sighed the soul of the dead...

Since then, things calmed down and Elisha forgot about his companion.

The Adviser A Turkmen folk tale

But when we in reality perceived a body of Turcomans coming down upon us, the scene instantly changed. Some ran away; others, and among them my master, losing all their energies, yielded to intense fear, and began to exclaim, “Oh Allah! – Oh Imams! – Oh Mohammed the prophet; we are gone! We are dying! we are dead!”

The Adventures of Hajji Baba of Ispahan, by James Morier



One day, having returned from hunting, Padishah (king of kings) Sultansoyun and his vizier Mirali met a young woman in a village. The king stopped dead, struck by her breathtaking beauty, and only his eyes long followed her.

“You are my supreme vizier,” he said confidentially. “So, you have to understand my feelings and help me. How could I get this beauty?”

“It’s impossible, – she has a husband!” Mirali replied firmly (Mirali was born in a poor family and had never forgotten about it).

“She stole my heart, and my life will be nothing without her!”

“Anyway, My Lord, dismiss this whim from your mind. What does Sharia say? Don’t you know, that it is prohibited to mess about with married women? All the faithful will despise you!”

“Well, if so, I can reach my goal without you, by hook or by crook!” replied the sovereign heatedly. “And you, the mortal, go to her husband and offer him your service as an adviser!”

Sultansoyun was in a severe outbreak of passion. He did not go further to his palace, but stayed in the house of a rich Bai (landowner) and sent him for the husband of that beautiful woman.

Mirali went the same way at a rapid pace, having said Padishah that he wanted to visit a friend who lived in that village. He first came to the husband of the woman, who was just a poor peasant, and warned him, that Padishah will probably summon him and give him a tricky assignment. He also said that it is impossible to refuse the order and that he, Mirali, would help him to carry out this mandate.

The supreme vizier had well known his Master! Everything happened as he had predicted. After him, there came a breathless landowner. He stopped in front of the husband and gave him the order to appear before Padishah. With great respect, the man hastened to execute orders of the almighty Padishah...

“What is your name?” Sultansoyun asked the peasant.

“Karakduke,” replied the man.

“Karakduke? Excellent! So, Karakduke, I used to be curious about people wherever I go, and to give them some unusual assignments. If a man carried out my task, then I would reward him; if he couldn't or not very keen on it, – I would punish him. You are the most extraordinary man in this village. You have a strange name, uncommon face, and maybe there is something else, that is not the same as everyone has, eh?”

“I am an ordinary dehkaneen (peasant), but this is a rare thing and great happiness – to serve Almighty Padishah,” replied the poor man respectfully. “I will do everything that you are pleased to suggest!”

“It's wonderful! I'll give you a stallion, a couple of bulls, and a dozen of rams. Exactly six months later, you should get a litter from each of them!”

Karakduke bent into a bow in consent. But someone shouted from the crowd of spectators:

“Wai, you have lost your head, a miserable! Is it possible to obtain an offspring from a male?”

“Padishah is a Vicar of God on Earth. If he believes that males can give an offspring, then let it be!” replied the peasant.

...Six months passed there, and Padishah and his vizier paid a visit to that village again. Padishah stayed in the house of the same Bai, and Mirali, having asked for permission to visit his friend, went to Karakduke and introduced the spouses into his plan, because nothing had happened with the presented livestock.

Mirali barely had time to get away from that house, as Padishah sent a man for Karakduke. The messenger returned then to Padishah and reported him that the peasant could not appear before the eyes of the sovereign, because he was ill.

“Let his wife come here,” said the Father of the Faithful.

The poor woman came to the house of Bai and confirmed that her husband fell ill.

“What has happened to him?” asked Padishah.

“He is giving birth to a child, – there started contractions,” said the woman.

Sultansoyun laughed:

“How could it happen that a man bears children?”

“Oh, Gracious Padishah,” the woman said innocently, “If a bull is able to calve, a stallion – to foal, a ram – to lamb, why can't my husband give birth to a child?”

Padishah was surprised and annoyed, but he had nothing to argue. He smiled at the beautiful woman and let her go in peace. Then he shook his finger at Mirali:

“I see, – it couldn't happen without you!”

“I just fulfilled a desire of Your Majesty,” said Mirali with downcast eyes.

“My desire?!”

“If you remember, you had said, “Whereas you are not able to help me, go to the husband of the beauty and offer him your service as an adviser!”

The Angry Landlord A Vologda region folk tale

The main routes for their ships being the great rivers of the north, such as the Sukhona, which flows 300 miles to the north-east before joining the Vychegda to form the Northern Dvina. Because the low watershed at White Lake (Beloye ozero) was the door to the whole north-western region, the Novgoroders' name for these lands was Zavolochye – “beyond the portage”, from the Russian word *volok* (portage).

A History of the Peoples of Siberia, by James Forsyth



In the old days there lived a landlord with his wife in his ancestral manor. The landlord was keen on hunting and kept purebred dogs and horses. He was a man of character and no one could carry out his directives and commands as he had hoped. Therefore he was usually so angry that all peasants and servants were afraid of him and lived in fear and trembling.

One day he went to the town on commercial matters, and in the evening he visited a private club to drink some vodka with his friends. There was a large gathering of men to play cards. The angry landlord was lucky and won an estate from a wealthy merchant.

Straight from the town he went to his new house in the countryside and stayed there for a while to arrange economic affairs. His wife at that time remained as a hostess in his patrimony. The gentleman lingered for a few weeks in his new place, and in the meantime some trouble had occurred in his old house.

There was an urgent need to tell the landlord what had happened, but no one dared to do that. However, there lived a simple-minded bloke, Stepan, in that village, and the villagers persuaded him to go to their master.

“Well, if you want, I will go!” replied Stepan.

About three days the poor man went on foot to the new estate. When he got there, hungry and tired, the angry landlord having seen him from afar, unleashed the dogs on him, just out of boredom. The dogs rushed to Stepan but he gave them some bread and they let him alone. Stepan came into the house, bowed to his master and said:

“Good morning, sir!”

“Hey, what do you want? What’s the word on my wife?”

“There is almost nothing new at home, just I broke a knife the other day.”

“What is it about the knife?”

“We were just going to skin your hound. But when we started, the blade of my knife broke into pieces!”

“Which hound? What are you babbling about, you, scoundrel?”

“It was that dog, with which you used to go hunting. When you had bought her from the previous owner, you gave three serfs for her!”

“What are you clapping about, wicked liar? So, you mean that my best hound died, but why?”

“She ate too much horseflesh, – meat of your stallion!”

“Damn it all! Oh no, has my stallion died?”

“Yes, sir.”

“What a misfortune, I’m awfully sorry! Why did he die?”

“He probably busted a gut.”

“But what was the matter, he was hard working or you drove him too hard?”

“No, sir, it did not go, he stood in the stall!”

“And what happened?”

“Then your farm agent made him carry water.”

“But why was water needed?”

“Well, when your pigsty caught fire, the farm agent made him carry water to put out the fire.”

“What on earth do you mean, my pigsty has burnt down?”

“Yes, sir!”

“Why has it burnt down?”

“You see, sir, it was standing near your cowshed, and likely it caught a fire from the cowshed.”

“That is my cowshed has also burnt down?”

“It burned down like a candle, sir!”

“But why did it catch fire?”

“I don’t know that for sure, sir, whether it caught fire on its own or the fire spread from your house.”

“Do you mean that my house has also burned down?”

“Your house burned out completely, sir, disappeared without a trace!”

“Has my homestead burned out too?”

“Everything has gone to blazes. All the cattle have died off. There is an open field there, – it’s nice to sow grain!”

The host squeezed his head with his hands and began to wail...

“But why did the house catch fire?” asked then the landlord.

“It took fire from a candle, sir.”

“And what did they light the candle for?”

“What for, sir? As always, sir, candles should be lit if someone died!”

“But who died there, bloody hell?”

“Holy God, let her easily live in the other world! Your wife has passed away.”

“What... Come again? My wife has died, but why?”

“She had got some disease and then passed away.”

“Oh, my God... What kind of disease?” asked the angry landlord.

“I don’t know, sir, I’m not a doctor!” replied Stepan...

The Cock-And-Bull Story An Abkhazian folk tale

Abkhazians call themselves Apswa (plural Apswaa) ... Christianity arrived two centuries before its official introduction under Justinian sixth century. Sunni Islam spread with Ottoman Turkish influence from around 1500. Traditional paganism has never entirely disappeared, making adherence to either major religion relatively superficial, although within Abkhazia most Abkhazians are nominally Christian.

Encyclopedia of Russian History, editor in chief James Millar



When I was a young man, I had many herds of horses. They grazed freely on the seashore. One day I walked along the beach to drive my herds home. Having come to the place, I looked about, searching for the horses, but did not find them. Then I stuck a staff into the ground, stood up on the staff, looked around again and saw my horses over the hills and far away. I rushed there like a bird on the wing, put them together and drove them home.

On the way home, a grey mare relaxed her course, stopped running and foaled. A newborn foal could not follow my herds, and I could not leave the kid to its fate. I mounted the mare, placed the foal over her neck, but she was not able to get up and carry us. Then I took off the foal, saddled it up, put the mare on its neck and hit the road on the foal's back. We raced like the wind!

By the end of the day, my horses got tired and thirsty. I drove them down to the sea and was about to water my herds, but what in hell was that? The sea was covered with ice! I threw a large stone down, trying to break the ice, but it did not help. I pushed a heavy rock to the ice, but it did

not work. I left no stone unturned but could do nothing! Then I got angry, took a run and bashed my head against the ice – and it flew into pieces like glass!

I watered my horses, sat astride the foal, took the mare upon him and rode away. I was riding for a while but suddenly saw a beautiful girl, sitting on a balcony of a magnificent tower, playing an achamgure (a three-stringed instrument similar to a lute) and singing for me:

“How handsome
is this stranger!
I fell in love with him
at the first glance.
I would marry him,
if he had a head!”

I was very happy, although did not realize her allegory. However, when I passed my hand over the head, I noticed then that I had no head! Oh my God, it looked like I had left my head on the beach! I bowed the girl, turned back, rode to the sea, then I cast a glance at the seashore – my head was lying there.

But what the hell had happened to it? It was frozen into ice! I began to pull my head, but I could not drag it out of the ice. There was a herd of livestock grazing nearby. I hitched my head to a couple of buffalo and a couple of horses, but they were not able to pull my head off.

Thus, there I was standing not knowing what to do... But suddenly I saw two wasps. I caught them, yoked them and forced to pull my head. They pulled the traces, the ice cracked, and the wasps dragged out my head to the beach. I put the head on my shoulders, mounted the foal, placed the mare on its neck and rode away.

On the way home, I saw a rabbit that had never been born, sitting at a nut bush that had never been growing. I pulled out a gun without a trigger. I fired without aiming. I killed a rabbit without a shot. I picked up the rabbit, strapped it to the saddle and went on.

In my path, I met a man. He bowed his head, welcoming me, and said:

“Hey, old chap, let your mother feel happy! What can you gave me, if I tell you something joyful?”

“If you tell me something joyful, I’ll give you a rabbit.”

“Very well, your father was born today!” he said.

I was so delighted that gave him my rabbit.

I came home, entered the room and saw – there was my father, lying in a cradle and screaming. I took him in my arms. What a good baby boy! Of great joy, I presented my father that mare, which I had brought riding on the foal.

Since then we lived happily ever after.

The Gift of the Black Demon

A Polish folk tale

Relations between Poles and Russians have never been easy. Despite their close linguistic and ethnic ties, differences rather than similarities characterize the relationship between them. In religious denomination, political tradition, worldview, even the alphabets in which they write their related languages, Poles and Russians are clearly distinct.

Encyclopedia of Russian History, editor in chief James Millar



Once upon a time there was a poor farmer in a village. He had a wife and many children. He tried to do everything to the best of his ability, but could not keep his family. That is why his neighbours used to call him Jonah the Needy. The man inherited a piece of land from his father but it was useless. There was swamp on the left, sand on the right, and only a narrow strip of proper land in the middle, all covered with pits and stones. He had to be patient and to give up hope for the better.

One day Jonah the Needy went to plough his field and took the last loaf of bread with him. The day had already half gone but the man was ploughing and ploughing. He was so tired that his stomach cramped from hunger. He had to relax and eat some bread that was hidden under his shirt. The man turned his bulls loose to graze on grass, sat down at the edge of the field, untied the linen cloth, looked at the loaf of bread and thought things over.

He was a good, hard-working fellow, he loved his wife and children with all his heart, and he had been dragging out a miserable existence for them. He looked at the bread for a while, then wrapped the bread up and, with a heavy sigh, put the bundle under a bush.

“Yeah, I’m tired, of course, but I would rather hang on, till all the work is finished, and eat before going home. Then I can do without dinner at home – my wife and children will have more to eat,” he thought and resumed his work.

Meanwhile a Demon came out of the woods and hid behind a bush of dog rose. He saw a man and tried to figure out how to make fun of him. As soon as the man took hold of the plough – the Demon stole the bread from the bundle and ate it up. Then he hid behind the bush waiting for more – what would happen next, when the man could not find his bread in place.

For a long time Jonah the Needy suffered from persistent hunger, finally he could not bear it any longer.

“I am a living man,” he thought and went to the bundle. He untied it but there was nothing there, not even a crumb of bread.

“What a wonder,” was surprised the poor man. “No one has been here yet but someone still stole the bread. He must also be a hungry man. Let him eat for his health – I won’t die of hunger for one day. For the sake of God, I should cast my bread upon the waters.”

The man crossed himself, made a prayer and continued to plough the field until the evening.

“It’s a bad job altogether,” the Demon muttered under his breath and gritted his teeth. “I stole his last piece of bread! Lo and behold – he did not even swear, did not ruin his soul, but kept his fingers crossed for me!”

The Demon fell into terrible rage and sank through the ground into the belly of hell. He appeared before the Great Devil and told him everything that had happened.

“Hell, you made a big mistake!” said the Devil. “We are demons and should do evil to all people, but we must do so with conscience, because the Almighty lays the blame on the right shoulders for atrocities. Do evil to a bad man – it serves him right, he deserves it, but to steal the last piece of bread from an honest man – that is a shameful thing! Furthermore, you had gobbled up the farmer’s bread, but bread is the gift of God – demons are not allowed to eat bread. Therefore, I impose penance on you! This very hour, go to Jonah the Needy and serve him as a labourer for seven years – for the evil you had caused him!”

When the Demon heard the Devil’s verdict, he hunched like a wet hen, but he could do nothing!

He pretended to be a homeless wanderer, came to Jonah the Needy and asked for a job. The man told him:

“How can I keep a worker? I’m myself almost dying of hunger!”

The Demon explained his idea:

“I’m a poor man, and so are you. Let us act together and do all the work – all for one. I have no wife, no kids; I have almost a new fur coat and a nice shirt on me. I can make bast shoes from a lime tree at any time. I have no need to roam about fairs, so I don’t need any payment from you: a coin is round – it will roll out of the pocket sooner or later. I hope you will share with me just a piece of bread.”

He was begging so hard that the man even got a little scared. Somehow or other, the Demon stayed at the farmer’s house. He began working as a farm labourer and was so busy getting his hooks on the new master that all the villagers were surprised.

At first, the Demon set to work on the horse – all day long he was cleaning him with a new brush, feeding him with selected oats, watering him with spring water. In less than a week, the farmer could hardly recognize the horse: his sides rounded, his skin gleamed and his mane waved by the wind. The horse began to work all day long without getting tired. As soon as the labourer had brought the horse in order, he went to a cow.

Every day he himself took the cow to graze, chose good places with lush grass, protected her from flies, watered her with pure water. When the cow returned home from the pasture, her udder was as big as a bucket. The farmer’s children began to drink plenty of milk and to eat their soup with sour cream and their bread with butter. The wife had no complaints about the man, and the children

were not crying, but Jonah the Needy suddenly felt sick at heart. Neither he nor the villagers could understand where all this had come from?

The Demon worked without ceasing: as soon as he had finished with household chores, he went to the field. In one day, he fertilized the entire field with manure, ploughed the land, and sowed wheat. The crops grew up as a thick forest and Jonah the Needy gathered in an unthinkable harvest. The villagers were looking in wonder at the poor man:

“Have you ever seen the likes of this? He has a full granary!”

The next year the Demon said:

“Man, let’s plough the swamp this year. I believe that the summer will be dry. This warm weather should bring good crops!”

The labourer began to plough the swamp, and the land dried up just after the plough, as though it was in an oven. He sowed wheat in the harrowed marsh, and crops were very good that year! At the beginning, the neighbours looked on and laughed at the bumpkin, that was throwing his grain in the dirt. But when Jonah the Needy brought the profuse harvest, they grew quiet and decided to do the same.

The following summer, the folks rushed to plough the swamp and sow wheat, but the man was doing everything on his farm the other way round. The labourer said to his master:

“From all appearances there should be a rainy summer. Let’s plough a sandy wasteland, and let the neighbours dig muddy ground!”

The Demon chose the sands on rising ground where nothing had grown before. He ploughed the land and sowed the wheat. Right afterward, there fell thick rain and all the grain in the lowlands began rotting. The villagers barely reaped any of the wheat, having sown in the plains. Again Jonah the Needy did not know what to do with his harvest.

To cut a long story short, the man became rich, he paid a wage to the labourer and lived as cool as a cucumber. But the Demon was not so delighted and thought:

“Well, I have more than paid for the loaf of bread that I had stolen. My master lives like a fighting cock, and it’s the right time to say goodbye to him. So it would be a good thing to play a dirty trick on the man – to round the ‘evening’ off!”

And then he said to the farmer:

“Look, man, there is a stock of wheat here in abundance. What should we do with it?”

“What do you mean – ‘what should we do’? We would eat for health, give alms to the poor, we could donate help to a hospital, or give loans to those who have lost crops. And let the rest be stored for a rainy day! There may come a bad year,” said Jonah the Needy.

The Demon did not like these words, so he explained:

“It’s gonna be a devil of a nuisance – to keep the harvest in the granary! You must stir the grain once and again – to protect it from rotting, from spoiling by mice, and so on. I’ve got an idea and, if possible, this matter will bring us considerable profit, honour, and glory.”

“What’s the matter?” asked the man.

“The point is very simple. People are brewing beer from barley, and we would brew something from wheat – maybe this thing will pan out,” said the Demon.

“Well, try it yourself, if you like. It’s none of my business,” replied Jonah the Needy.

The Demon set to work: he procured boilers and vats, ground the corn and began to boil the wheat. There he was stirring the soup, adding hops from time to time. He made a drink pure as water, bitter and strong as mustard, burning the mouth like flame. The Demon began humming and dancing with joy, named the drink moonshine, poured it into large bottles, then poured some into a glass, put it on the table and cordially invited his master:

“Yeah, it’s all there, all that you need, – gilt-edged!”

Jonah the Needy sipped some drink from the glass, pulled his face and choked:

“Oh, it tastes a bit bitter! It burns the throat as if it was brewed by a demon!”

The Demon just smiled:

“It’s nothing! The more profound the drink, the more pleasure of drinking. Gulp down another glass! Don’t worry, it will not hurt you. It’s the same bread, just boiled.”

The man drank the second glass, and it seemed not to burn as badly as the first one.

“It’s bitter,” said the farmer, “but the heat spreads throughout the body. That’s a good job!”

The Demon poured him a third glass and sighed:

“See what happens next, let’s have another one!”

The master clinked with the labourer and drank the third glass in one gulp.

“Really, it’s not so bitter,” said Jonah the Needy. “It’s not bitter at all!”

“To say ‘not bitter’ means to say nothing,” said the Demon. “This tastes out of this world! Let’s have one more drink!”

The man himself moved up the glass.

“Oh cheers!” he said. “Indeed, it’s a very tasty drink, it makes me cheerful. Yea, I feel like a new man of hot blood, ten years younger – I’m walking on air! Oh dear, my woman won’t recognize me, that’s for sure!”

“Let’s pour a fifth glass – still enjoy it,” said the Demon.

“And a sixth glass, I think, would not hurt us!” cried Jonah the Needy.

“Viva moonshine!” yelled the drunken Demon and started dancing around the house.

“Wait a minute,” shouted the man trying to pour the sixth glass. “I would be dancing with you if the hut were not shaking somehow up and down.”

The Demon thought aloud:

“Yeah, pigs might fly! It looks like I’m in a belly of hell; your soul, man, is in my pocket; and the Great Devil, our Lord, bestowed me the title of Black Demon for my trick, which will lead endless crowds of human souls under our wings...”

The bottle fell down and broke into pieces. The farmer’s wife came running and their children were running behind her. They looked – their dad was dancing with the labourer. They began to laugh, and it was the first time, when their father become a laughingstock for his children. Only the wife did not laugh – she realized that her husband was out of his mind. The drunken men began squirming after a great merriment, and black tar was flowing from the Demon’s mouth.

The woman ran to a barber for assistance and brought him home. The booze fighters had collapsed in the same place, where they had done “a job”. One of them was sleeping under a bench, and the other – in a pig’s trough.

They had slept it off by the morning, got up, but could barely move – their eyes were weary and their heads were like heavy stones.

“No problem,” said the Demon. “Let us fight fire with fire – let’s have a drink!”

“Oh no, you must be joking!” moaned Jonah the Needy.

“You should drink in one go. We’ll take a cup of kindness for old long since!” said the Demon and drank a mug of moonshine. The man obeyed and drank after him.

“It’s true – I feel better. Now I got it, let’s have another drink! Call the neighbours – let people know that I am no longer Jonah the Needy!”

“Just a moment,” said the Demon, “the more, the merrier; let’s have a revel!”

Since then, the farmer became fond of the bottle. The wife had a lot to put up with living with a drunkard like him. In less than a year Jonah the Needy had died. His land and his house were sold for the debts. His kids were left in the rough and rocky lap of poverty. They had to ask for handouts and listen to spiteful words about their father...

A lot of water had flowed under the bridge since then, and vodka has spread among people – the gift of the Black Demon.

The Hempen Shirt A Chuvash folk tale

Scholars agree that today's Chuvash are descendants of at least three groups: Turkic Bulgar tribes who arrived on the Volga in the seventh century from the Caucasus-Azov region; the closely-related Suvars (suvaz, perhaps the origin of chavash) who migrated from the Caucasus in the eighth century; and Finno-Ugric tribes who inhabited Chuvashia before the Turkic settlement.

Encyclopedia of Russian History, editor in chief James Millar



Once upon a time there lived a man and his wife. One day the husband felt bad and became ill. He suffered for a while and then died. Some time passed and an evil spirit got into the habit to visit the young widow every night. The devil used to appear before the woman in the guise of a handsome man and she became infatuated with him. Finally she realized that something terrible was happening. Somehow or other, the unfortunate woman tried to get rid of the man. She was almost exhausted, but the devil preyed on her mind and she could not do anything with him.

Once the widow told the woman next door about her trouble and the good woman said to her: "Dear, you should curtain the doorway with a hempen shirt. It will not allow the evil spirit to enter the house."

The widow obeyed her neighbour. She made a long shirt from hempen cloth and curtained the doorway to her house. The next night, the evil spirit came to the widow but the Hempen Shirt told him: "Wait a minute, good man, listen to what I have had to see and experience in my lifetime." "Well, what is it with you? Come on, get it out," answered the evil spirit.

“Look, even before I had come into the world,” the Shirt began its story, “there was a great deal of trouble with me. In the old days there lived a farmer in a village. Once on a spring morning he ploughed up the field. In a while, he harrowed the surface of his plot, and only then planted the hemp – that was me! At a later date, he harrowed the soil for the second time. The ground covered me like a blanket, and the sun warmed my bed. While the first rains have made the ground damp, there sprouted little stems and I saw the light. Well then, when I was born, I began to grow and grow, rising to the sun...”

“Okay dear, stop talking,” said the evil spirit with a dirty look. “Let me in!”

“But if you started to listen, let me finish the explanation,” answered the Shirt. “When I grew up and become hardened, I was pulled out of the ground...”

“I realize,” again interrupted the angry devil, “off with you!”

“No mate, you do not understand,” the Shirt did not let him go. “Hear me out, please, I have still a lot to say. Then folks had to grind me and separate the seeds...”

“What the hell? Stop it!” The evil spirit lost his patience. “Go away!”

But at that time a rooster crowed in the yard, heralding the morning, and the evil spirit disappeared, never having visited the widow.

The next night he came again, and again the Shirt did not let him go.

“So, where was I?” said the Shirt. “Oh, yeah, it’s on the seeds. Then folks skinned the hemp, blew it in the wind and put the seeds into storage. And the very hemp without seeds, they first piled in the stacks, and then put in the water to soak for a while.”

“Well, is that all?” asked the evil spirit in a bad temper. “Let me go!”

“No, that is not the half of it!” answered the Shirt. “I am still lying in the water. Only in three weeks, I should be pulled out of the water and put to dry!”

“Enough is enough, leave now!” The devil was getting furious. “Make way!”

“You have not even heard the most important thing!” said the Shirt. “You do not know how they would crush and break my bones! Thus, they must crush and break me as long, as my body will be cleansed up from the bones. More than that, they should put me in a mortar, and the three or four of them should beat me with pestles...”

“Get out of the way!” said the evil spirit, having lost his patience.

“They would then knock all the dust out of me,” continued the Shirt, “and leave the clean body. They would hang me on a combing machine and divide into thin fibres, and then they would spin me for some time. A spun yarn they would wind round a reel, and put it into alkaline liquor. Then it will be hard to survive, because they would clog up my eyes with ash, so that I could see nothing. Yes, I can’t see now...”

“And I don’t wanna hear it any more!” said the evil spirit and was about to fly into the house, but at that time the cock crowed the next time, and the devil disappeared.

He reappeared on the third night, feeling a little irritated at that tricky shirt. But the Hemen Shirt continued its tale:

“Okay dear, they should wash me off, then dry, make the coils, pass through a reed, then weave, and only then I’ll turn into a canvas.”

“Hey, is that all now?” asked the evil spirit. “Let me go!”

“There is no standing still,” said the Shirt. “You should listen to the whole tale... They would boil the canvas in alkaline water, lay it on the green grass and wash it from the ash. And then the three or four of them would crush me for the second time, until I got soft. After that they would cut off a piece of canvas, as you want, and sew a shirt. Only then the seed, that was thrown down into the ground long before, could turn into the Hemen Shirt, which now is curtaining the door...”

There again crowed the rooster in the yard, and the evil spirit had to get out of his way empty-handed. After all, he had been tired of standing at the door and listening to “the old wives” tales”...

Since then, he had lost interest in his job and left the young widow alone.

The Irony of Fate A Tajik folk tale

The Tajiks are the most prominent indigenous non-Turkic population in Central Asia. They are of Persian/Iranian ethnic descent, although their exact origin is subject to debate. Legends link the Tajiks with Alexander the Great and his campaign in the region north of Afghanistan and west of China – what is today Tajikistan.

Encyclopedia of Russian History, editor in chief James Millar



In the old days there lived a rich man in a city – Agha. Every morning after his breakfast, he used to have a rest lying on a sofa, on the top of seven blankets. Sometimes he called his wife and began to blow his horn:

“Hey, woman, you are swimming in luxury and prosperity under the shadow of my brilliant mind and my inexhaustible wealth. Women all over the city pay honour to you, an ordinary and poor girl, because of my high position and far-reaching influence. Only thanks to my good fortune, you have never felt hunger and thirst. A thousand times you should praise the Almighty for your wise and intelligent husband!”

All this time the wife of Agha stood before him bowing her head. She was totally overawed by her husband.

Every day, she got up before dawn. All day long she had been on the fly, cooking meals, feeding the cattle, milking the cows, sweeping the yard or cleaning the house. In the evening, she used to cook tasty treats for some friends of her husband and then she served his insatiable guests. The greedy master had not given her helpers, and the good woman coped with all the work by herself. Moreover,

she embroidered skullcaps at odd moments, after all the cases. The woman next door then sold them at a high price, and the wife gave all the money to her husband.

One day, when the rich man began to praise himself and to blame his wife for the next time, she could not be patient any longer and said:

“For a long time, I was also thinking that only thanks to you I have been clad and shod. But over time I realized that there was a large share of my work in increasing your wealth, and you have no reason to reproach me.”

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