

"At the Behest of the Pike" Russian Folk-Tale (Text in the public domain.  
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**“At the Behest of the Pike”**

**Russian Folk-Tale**

ONCE there lived a poor peasant; and, however much he might toil and moil, he got nothing out of it. "Oh," he thought to himself, "mine is a sorry lot; I spend all my days on my fields; and then, when I look, I am starving, whilst my neighbour is lying all day long on his back, and then he has a big estate and all the profits swim into his pockets. Evidently I have not pleased God. I will get up in the morning and pray until evening, and perhaps the Lord may have mercy on me."

So he began to pray to God, and went hungry for days on days; and he still went on praying.

At last Easter Day came, and the bells rang for Mass. So the poor peasant thought, "All good folks are getting ready to break the fast, and I have not a crust of bread. Well, if I bring water, I can sip it like soup." So he took a small can, went to the well, and as soon as he dipped it into the water a big pike fell into it. Then the peasant was very glad. "Here is something for supper; I will cook it and make fish soup of it, and shall have a fine supper."

Then the pike said to him in a human voice: "Let me go free, good man, go free. I will make you happy; whatever your soul may desire you shall possess. You need only say:

At the pike's good pleasure,  
By God's good measure—

let this or that appear! and you will get it at once."

So the peasant put the pike back into the water, went to his hut, sat down at the table and said:

"At the pike's good pleasure,  
By God's good measure—

let the table be covered and my dinner ready."

Then from somewhere or other all sorts of dishes and drinks appeared on the table, enough to please a Tsar, and a Tsar would not have been ashamed of it. So the poor man crossed himself, said "Glory be to Thee, O Lord! now I can break the fast." So he went to the church, attended Matins and Mass, turned back and again broke his fast, ate and drank as well, went outside the door and sat at the counter.

Just about then the Princess had an idea that she would go abroad in the streets, and she went with her attendants and maids of honour, and for the sake of the holy festival went to give alms to the poor; she gave to them all but forgot the poor peasant. Then he said to himself:

"At the pike's good pleasure,  
Of God's good treasure—

let the Tsarévna bear a child." And at the word that very instant the Tsarévna became pregnant, and in ten months she bore a son.

Then the Tsar began to ask her, "Do acknowledge with whom you have been guilty."

Then the Tsarévna wept and swore in every way that she had been guilty with nobody. "I do not know myself," she said, "why the Lord has chastised me."

The Tsar asked, but found nothing out.

Soon a boy was born who grew not by days but by hours; and at the end of a week he could already talk. So the Tsar summoned all the *boyárs* and the senators from every part of the kingdom to show them the youth, but none of them acknowledged that he was the father.

"No," the boy answered, "none of them is my father."

Then the Tsar bade the maids of honour and attendants take him up to every courtyard, through all the streets, and to show him to all manner of people. So the attendants and maids of honour took the youth through all the courtyards, through all the streets they went. But the boy said nothing.

At last they came to the poor peasant's hut. As soon as the boy saw that peasant, he at once stretched out his little hands and said "*Tyátya, Tyátya!*" Then they told the Emperor of this, and they summoned the poor man into the palace, and the Tsar began to inquire of him, "Acknowledge on oath, is this your boy?"

"No, he is God's son."

Then the Tsar was angry and married the poor man to the Princess, and after the wedding he set them both with the child, in a big tub, smeared it with tar, and sent it out into the open sea. So the tub sailed on the open sea, and the boisterous winds carried and bore it to a distant shore. When the poor man heard that the water no longer moved under them, he said:

"At the pike's good pleasure,  
At God's good measure—

let the barrel rest on a dry spot."

So the barrel turned round and got on to a dry spot, and they went on, following their eyes. And they went on and on, on and on, and they had nothing to eat or drink. The Princess was utterly exhausted and had pined away to a shadow, and she could hardly stand on her legs.

"Now," said the poor man, "do you know what hunger and thirst are?"

"Yes, I do," said the Princess.

"Well, this is what the poor have to endure. Yet you would not give me alms on Easter Day." Then the poor man said:

"At the pike's good pleasure,  
Of God's good treasure—

let there be here a rich palace, the finest in all the world, with gardens and ponds and all sorts of pavilions."

As soon as he had spoken a rich palace appeared; faithful henchmen ran out of it and carried them in their hands, led them into the white stone rooms, and they sat down at the oaken tables with chequered linen on them. It was marvellously decorated, was this palace. On the table everything was ready, wine and sweets and made dishes. The poor man and the Tsarévna ate and drank at their will, rested them, and went for a walk into the garden.

"Everything is beautiful here," said the Princess; "the only thing still lacking is to see the birds upon our ponds."

"Wait, you shall have birds as well," answered the poor man, and he said at once:

"At the pike's good pleasure,  
At God's good measure—

let twelve ducks and one drake swim on the pond, and let them have one feather of gold and another of silver, and let the drake have a diamond tuft on his forehead!"

And lo and behold, on the water there were twelve ducks and one drake swimming; one feather was of gold and one feather was of silver, and the drake had a diamond tuft on his forehead.

So there the Princess and her husband lived without grief or moil, and their son grew up a big lad and began to feel in himself a giant's strength. And he asked leave of his father and mother to go out into the white world and to seek himself a bride. They gave him leave to go, and said, "Go, my son."

So he saddled his knightly horse and set out on his road and way. And as he journeyed on he met an old woman who said, "Hail, Russian prince, where do you wish to go?"

"I am going, *bábushka*<sup>1</sup> to seek a bride, but I do not know where I am to find her."

"Stay, I will tell you, my child. Do you go beyond the ocean into the thrice-tenth kingdom; there there is a king's daughter so fair, that, if you go through all the world, you will never find any one more beautiful."

So the good youth thanked the woman, went to the seashore, hired a boat, and sailed to the thrice-tenth land. He sailed, maybe far, maybe near, maybe long, maybe short—the tale is soon told but the deed is not soon done—and he at last arrived at that kingdom, and appeared before the king of it, and asked for his daughter's hand in marriage.

Then the King said to him, "You are not the only suitor for my daughter; there is another suitor, a mighty knight. If I refuse him he will destroy all of my kingdom."

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<sup>1</sup> Grandmother.

"But, if you decline my offer, I will ravage your kingdom."

"What will you?—you had better measure your strength with him: to whichever of you conquers I will give my daughter."

"Very well; summon all the Tsars and Tsarévichi, all the Kings and Korolévichi, to see us wage an honourable [holmgang](#) to win your daughter."

So then hunters were sent out to all cities, and one year had not gone by before from all the neighbouring parts all the Tsars and Tsarévichi, all the Kings and Korolévichi came together, as also the Tsar who had put his own daughter into the barrel and sent her out into the sea.

On the day appointed all the knights made ready for a bloody holmgang. They fought and fought, and the earth groaned at their blows, the forests bowed down and the rivers rose in waves. The Tsarévna's son first overcame his opponent and cut off his turbulent head.

Then all the royal *boyárs* ran up, took the doughty youth into their hands and led him into the palace. Next day he was married to the Korolévna. And after they had feasted at the wedding he set about inviting all the Tsars and Tsarévichi, the Kings and the Korolévichi as his guests to his father and mother. So they all came together, and they got their ships ready and sailed on the sea. The Tsarévna with her husband received her guests with honour, and they began to celebrate banquets and to be joyous. The Tsars and the Tsarévichi, the Kings and the Korolévichi, gazed at the palace and the gardens and wondered. They had never seen such wealth. Then some of them wondered when they saw the ducks and drakes, every one of them worth half a kingdom.

So the guests were fed and bethought themselves of going home, but before ever they had got to the haven, swift hunters precursed them, saying, "Our master bids you turn back again; he wishes to hold secret counsel with you."

So the Tsars and Tsarévichi, the Kings and Korolévichi, were turning back, when the master came to meet them and said: "Oh ye good folk, one of my ducks has gone: has any one of you taken it?"

"Why are you making a vain quest?" the Tsars and Tsarévichi, the Kings and Korolévichi answered; "this would be an unguestly act. Search us all over. If you find the duck on any one of us do with him what you will; if you do not, let your own head pay for it."

"I will," said the master. And he placed them all in a row and searched them; and, as soon as he had come to the father of the Tsarévna, he said quietly:

"At the pike's good pleasure,  
At God's good measure—

under the lappet of the kaftan of this Tsar, let the duck be found." So he went and lifted his kaftan and found the duck tied to the lappet; one feather was of gold, one was of silver.

Then all the Tsars and Tsarévichi, Kings and Korolévichi cried out fiercely, "Ho! ho! ho! what a deed! are Tsars turning into thieves?"

Then the Tsarévna's father swore by everything holy that as to thieving there had never been such an idea in his head. And he had no idea how the duck had come to him.

"That is a fine tale; it was found on you; you must be guilty."

Then the Tsarévna came out, burst upon her father, and acknowledged that she was his daughter whom he had given away to the poor peasant in marriage and had put into a barrel. "*Bátyushka*"<sup>2</sup> she said, "you would not then believe my words, and now you have acknowledged yourself that it is possible to be guilty without guilt."

And she told him how it had all arisen. And after that they began to live, and lived all together and lived all for good and forgot by-gones.

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<sup>2</sup> Father