

MONTENEGRIN FOLK PROSE

LEGENDS, FAIRY TALES, FABLES, TALES

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Milovan Radojević

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PREFACE

Dear reader,

The book before you is imbued with the spirit of a Mediterranean people from the southeast of Europe – the Montenegrin people. Born upon a soil that inherits the legacy of an ancient civilization, Montenegrin folk prose carries within it deep layers of Slavic-Ilyrian tradition interwoven with Greek and Roman influences. Upon this foundation, and on the borderland between the Christian East and West, a distinctive Montenegrin culture and spirituality have taken shape, enduring to this day. Here – adapted for the contemporary reader – you will find a selection of fairy tales, legends, fables, and stories, remembered and passed down from generation to generation, each bearing the imagination of the folk storyteller. In the tales and legends, you will meet mythical beings – fairies, dragons, giants, and heroes fighting in the uncertain struggle between good and evil. In the fables, every living and non-living phenomenon will speak with a human tongue. The stories, portraying with wit the virtues and flaws of ordinary people, may well make you smile...

The prose of the Montenegrin people was recorded by oral tradition collectors during the 19th and 20th centuries, while the living heritage still resonated in everyday life. The sources for this book are four anthologies of Montenegrin folk prose – *The*

Flame of Self-Creation (Vatra samotvora), The Fairy Mountain (Vilina gora), When All Spoke (Kad je sve zborilo), and The Time of the Deluge (Potopno vrijeme) – compiled half a century ago by the philologists, brothers Radoje and Danilo Radojević. We hope, dear reader, that as you explore this enchanting world, you will find joy, uncover meaningful lessons, and experience a glimpse of the vibrant creative spirit of the Montenegrin people.



MONTENEGRIN LEGENDS



Tsar Dukljan

The old ones, who bear in memory the words of their forebears, say that from the dawn of time an armageddon hath thundered above the Lake of Labeatis. Nor hath it ever ceased save on the daybreak of the Feast of the Holy Trinity, when the sun's shaft bathes the peak of Mount Rumija and the divine light graces the Christian temples, driving back the darkness that surges forth from the mountains of Prokletije. And on that mountain dwell the giants of the night, and whosoever ventures thither alone, returns not.

These giants, in times long past, dwelt among men and wrought them no harm. They were three brethren, and they had a sister of surpassing beauty, who was as great of stature as they. At first, they were of one mind and heart, but as they beheld their sister whilst she bathed and combed her flowing tresses, little by little, a desire did stir within each of them to take her as his bride. Of all women, none but she seemed worthy to them. One day, they learned about one another's intentions and a fierce broil arose amongst them.

The sister hearkened to all, and when she perceived the ill-omened hour, knowing that her brethren would soon fall to strife over her, she devised a cunning stratagem to quell them and turn them from their purpose. For she could not endure the thought of becoming a bride to one of her own brothers. She bade them contend in the building of great works, promising that the one who first completed

his task would claim her as his bride. One of the giants, Dukljan by name, set to hewing mighty stone blocks and built a city at the mouth of the Zeta River where it meeteth the Morača. The second took up his pickaxe and began to dig a trench, bringing water from the Cijevna River unto the Morača, and the third embarked on raising a dry stone wall about the land. The sister, in her heart, hoped that such tremendous toils would be beyond the strength of her brethren and that they would not complete their labours. Yet, to her astonishment, all three swiftly brought their tasks to a close. Dukljan, surpassing the others, set the last stone upon the city, whilst the trench and the wall were but a breath from completion.

When she beheld what had transpired, the sister, in despair, took to flight. But Dukljan swiftly overtook her and grasped her by the hair. She cried out so loudly that the very hills quaked, and she wrenched herself free, leaping into a deep whirlpool. Dukljan could not draw her forth from the waters alive, and in that moment his wits scattered. He grew maddened with fury, and in his wrath, he became swollen with pride and named himself emperor. He then raised an army against his brethren, hurling them into the lands of Prokletije. As a tyrant, he ruled with cruelty, tormenting the people, for he believed not in the existence of a god in the heavens.

Once the wind withheld the rain, and a great drought prevailed, for such was the will of God. When his garden had withered, Dukljan first commanded his subjects to bring forth three hundred oxen from his realm and slay them, stripping their hides. Then he ordered that great stakes be driven into the ground wherever his garden's reach did extend, and upon these stakes he bade them stretch the hides, perforated with needles so finely as to let but a drop of water pass through. Thereafter, he forced the people to draw water from the Morača and carry it up to the loft of hides, where they were to

pour it forth in hopes that the rain might fall upon his garden. He even commanded that the young men, with hammers, strike the hides to make thunder. Thus, Tsar Dukljan sought to fashion the heavens for himself, that the rain might fall upon his garden when he willed it, and not as the Lord decrees.

– Behold, I can work as well as your god! – he declared with defiance.

Many evils did Tsar Dukljan commit, and he persecuted the Christians, mocking their faith. The Lord, who beheld all these deeds, could no longer bear such wickedness, and He commanded Saint Elijah to descend from heaven and smite with thunder the tsar, who had deceived himself into believing he was a god. Elijah did as he was bid, yet could not harm Dukljan with the bolts of lightning. Instead, he but vexed him, assailing his crops with thunderclaps and tearing stones from the walls. Tsar Dukljan, in his wrath, threatened Saint Elijah, proclaiming that when he laid hands upon him, he would subject him to unspeakable torments, the likes of which none had ever known. At last, weary of the ordeals, the tsar took up a hammer and forged an iron chain with which to bind the thunderer. This did not escape Saint Elijah's notice, and he assumed the guise of a wanderer, drawing nigh unto Dukljan. With words more cunning than those of the tsar, he learned of his wicked design.

– Great tsar, you must punish this villain who brings harm upon thee! Though I know not if these gleaming shackles thou hast so skilfully wrought will fit him.

– I have made them roughly thus, for I saw him but from afar.

– So I say, but I have heard he is as great of stature as thee. To avoid a mistake, it would be wise to first test the collar upon thy own neck. If it fits thee, it shall fit him also.

Tsar Dukljan fell into deep thought and placed the iron collar about his neck, whereupon Saint Elijah crossed his staff and had the fetter melt. Then, with a mighty shove, he cast the tsar into the swelling river Morača, which carried him from his palaces to the bridge of the pretors, where he became ensnared among the rocks. Some shepherds, beholding the tsar in the river, whispered the tale onto the people, who, incensed by his misdeeds, seized the fortuity and, at that very spot, firmly nailed him to the arch of a cave.

It is told that Tsar Dukljan stands bound there to this very day, suffering, gnawing upon his chain. Each morn, on the day of Christ's birth, he would have shattered it, but to prevent this from coming to pass, the blacksmiths, every year, ere the break of dawn on Christmas Eve, strike the anvil thrice, and the chain thickens back to its appointed measure. Were he to succeed in loosening himself and rising, the people would again bear their ancient torments.

How Nikšić Came to Be

When Ban Ugren, a mighty and wealthy lord, held dominion over the lands surrounding what is now Nikšić, he resolved to raise a city beside the upper course of the River Zeta. So he gathered men and made ready all that was needful for the building. On the eve of the day when they were to break the ground for the foundations, a woman adorned in gold from head to heel came to him in a dream and said: "If thou wouldst have the city built upon firmer ground, and that it bear thy name for all time, let the one who first strikes the earth on the morrow smite it thrice with his mattock and utter these words threefold: 'God help Ugren and Ugren's progeny!' Thus shall the city belong forever to thy lineage and carry thy name unto the ages."

Ban Ugren did all as had been revealed to him in the dream. He took with him his most faithful servant, Nikša, to the place where the city was to be founded, and bade him strike the earth thrice with the mattock and speak the words: "God help Ugren and Ugren's progeny!" Nikša took up the mattock, struck the earth, and said:

– God help Nikša and Nikša's progeny!

– Not so, ill befall thee! – thundered the ban. – Say "Ugren and Ugren's progeny!"

Yet Nikša struck the earth a second time and again spoke:

– God help Nikša and Nikša’s progeny!

Then Ban Ugren grew enraged, tore the plough from Nikša’s hands, and struck it deep into the earth. Alas, in his fury, instead of saying what he ought, he repeated: “God help Nikša and Nikša’s progeny!” When he saw what he had done, how he had unwittingly confirmed what Nikša had spoken, and knowing that a name uttered thrice could no longer be undone, he cast the plough aside and said to Nikša:

– Lo, here you have both the town and its name. Let it be called Nikšić in your honour!

And thus it remained.

How Bar Was Conquered

In the time when the Turks besieged Bar with the intent to capture it, the city was surrounded by strong and high ramparts, which still stand to this day. With the military technology of that era, the city was a difficult prize to seize. Thus, the Turkish siege dragged on, and who can say how much longer it would have lasted had the city gates not, by chance, been opened, allowing the Turkish army to enter without a fight and claim the city. Here is how it happened.

The Venetian army, which was stationed in the fortified city defending it, was commanded by the provveditore, the Duke's governor. The provveditore had a young and beautiful daughter. On sunnier days when the fighting would pause, she would often stroll along the city's ramparts. On one such occasion, she spied a young and handsome Turkish officer, who, along with his soldiers, was on guard below the ramparts. And the Turkish officer, too, noticed the beautiful Venetian lady. This encounter became a frequent occurrence until between the two young souls there grew an irresistible longing, which took hold of their hearts, so that they saw nothing else, nor desired anything but to meet.

One night, when the moonlight shone and dispelled the darkness, and when the soldiers of both armies, those within the city and those outside, besiegers and besieged alike, were resting in a deep

sleep, the two young souls still kept their secret “vigil of love.” Through signs, they communicated, sending each other kisses.

On the spur of the moment, the beautiful Venetian lady, from beneath her long gown, drew forth a great key to the iron gate through which passage into the city was gained and tossed it to the Turk. He opened the gate, and the lovers met and embraced. But the Turkish guard heard the creaking of the heavy, rusted iron gates and signalled to the rest of their army, which quietly entered the city and surprised the Venetians while they slept.

Thus, the Turks captured Bar.

Ivan-Beg and Stanisav

On the eastern side of the village of Grac, in the Lješanska district, upon a hill called Krivi Vrh, there lie some ruins. It is said that here, Ivan Crnojević had planned to build a city after retreating from the flatlands of Zeta and abandoning his capital, Žabljak, in the face of the Turks. The hill is quite high and rugged, and one can approach its summit only from one side, by a narrow path. At the very top, there is a small flat area, and here one can discern the foundation of an old wall, surrounded by large piles of both hewn and unhewn stone. When Ivan-Beg¹ set about to build the foundation of the city, it is said that he looked out upon the nearby fields of the village, called Rupeš, and saw that one stalk of wheat stood out from the rest. He inquired about the reason for this, and a local man who stood beside him replied:

– My lord, during ploughing, dung fell upon that spot, and from it, that stalk grew.

– Well then, – said Ivan-Beg, – if wheat cannot grow here without dung, then this is no place for a city! – and he halted the construction.

¹ *Beg* (also rendered as *bey*) was a noble title of Turkish origin, used throughout the Balkans during the Ottoman era. Though Montenegro was independent at the time of this legend, such titles were sometimes retained for cultural or diplomatic reasons (t/n).

It is said that soon after a certain Stanisav from that village, who was among Ivan-Beg's servants, asked his master for a small piece of land outside the village of Grac.

– How much do you want? – asked Ivan-Beg.

– My lord, I need only as much land as a bull's hide can cover, – replied Stanisav.

– Take it, – answered Ivan-Beg, and he smiled at the peasant.

That night, Stanisav cut the hide very thinly and, with its straps, encircled a great deal of land, upon which the people of Grac later settled, naming the place Stanisavići.

When Ivan-Beg beheld what the crafty peasant had wrought on the morrow, he was astounded, yet did not revoke his word. However, he laid a curse upon him who had deceived him, saying:

– Now thou art forgiven, but may God grant that thou neither grow nor thrive; may thy house never be more than seven households, and among them, may there never be more than one, ready to receive a guest with no hindrance and to pay the priest his deserving due!

Thus, it is passed down that to this very day, the descendants of Stanisav have fared as Ivan-Beg foretold.

The Building of the Ostrog Monastery

When Saint Vasilije of Ostrog sought to raise a holy monastery, he began its construction upon the right bank of the Zeta River, atop the hill that rises above the village of Drenovštica. With him, he summoned masters and labourers, and they commenced to dig the foundation for the sacred edifice. As the sun set, the workers completed their toil and made their way home, leaving their tools at the site of their labour. Yet, on the morrow, when they returned, not a trace of their tools remained.

They marvelled in wonder at what could be the cause, for they knew none would dare steal the tools, and no sign of their disappearance could be found. Thus, they gathered new implements and resumed their work, but this time they hid them well, placing them in a different spot. Alas, when dawn's light broke, the tools had vanished once more, without so much as a whisper of their passing. On the third day, the same strange occurrence befell them. No tools were to be found anywhere, and thus the masters were compelled to halt their efforts.

On the fourth day, one of the masters, in the stillness of sleep, was visited by an unknown monk, who spoke unto him: "An invisible force hath borne the tools into the cave amidst the Ostrog cliffs, the one that stands across the Zeta River. There, thy monastery must rise, set up adjoining that cave, with the cave itself becoming a holy

church. Here, where thou hast begun, or anywhere else, thy work shall not be!”

Upon awakening, the master, with great wonder, recounted his dream to the other workers. Everybody stood amazed, for they could not believe that the tools had truly flown into the cave.

– How, by God, could they have flown? This cannot be! – they exclaimed, shaking their heads in disbelief.

– Indeed, it is so! Come, let us journey thither, and ye shall witness it with your own eyes! – insisted the master, resolute in his faith that the vision had come to pass.

After much persuasion, the workers, albeit with some scepticism, followed him to the cave to investigate. Along the way, some among them jested, thinking they would mock the master and his dream when no tools were found there. But when they had climbed the hill and entered the cave, they were struck dumb by the sight that awaited them – every tool, gathered in one place, as if placed there by unseen hands! They fell to their knees, for it was revealed to them that they had come upon a sacred site.

Without delay, they informed Vasilije, who, upon hearing of this marvel, commanded that the work resume within the cave. And so it was that the monastery was swiftly raised, where Saint Vasilije had chosen to dwell.

How Saint Tryphon Came to Kotor

In the distant past, some Venetian merchants, journeying to the farthest corners of the East, arrived at a place called Campsada, in the small land of Phrygia. There, by the tales of many, they learned that the precious relic of Saint Tryphon rested in Campsada. With all their might and by God's grace, they endeavoured to ransom the holy body. Once secured, they brought it to the shore and, with great honour, laid it in a boat. They then unfurled their sails and set forth upon the sea, intent on bringing Saint Tryphon to their homeland, just as they had once carried the body of Saint Mark the Evangelist. But by the decree of Him whom neither winds nor seas can resist, they soon lost all sense of the lands they passed. At last, believing they had reached Venice, they docked their ship at the port and anchored it. It was then revealed to them that what they had thought to be Venice was, in fact, the city of Kotor. In confusion, they returned to their vessel, raised its anchor, and set their sails once more. Alas, despite their repeated efforts, the ship could not leave the harbour.

– This is a wondrous miracle of God that it stays the ship! The martyr wishes not to go anywhere but desires to remain here! – thus spoke the sailors.

After consulting among themselves, they resolved to pray with all their hearts to the Almighty, and they did so, uttering these words:

– Almighty Creator, we beseech Thee, permit Thy humble servants to carry this saint by sea to our homeland, that our city may be blessed by his holy relics.

Convinced that the Almighty would hear their prayer, they were emboldened, raised the anchors once more, and with all their might endeavored to depart the harbor. But what is the strength of man when the ship would not stir an inch! Thus, through this manifest miracle, they came to understand that, with the holy martyr aboard, no prayers could move them from the spot.

Then they summoned the nobles and esteemed citizens of the city of Kotor and recounted to them the strange occurrence:

– Glorious, noble, and beloved sirs, we reveal to you a secret we have kept until now. From the East, we have brought the sacred body of Saint Tryphon. And when we attempted to sail forth, we struggled greatly, for he would not allow us to depart, nor would the ship stir a hair's breadth. Ponder and counsel us: what should we do with the martyr of Christ? We would sooner meet our doom, with all our wealth, than dare defy this holy martyr.

Hearing these words, the aforementioned nobles and townspeople withdrew to deliberate and shortly thereafter responded thus:

– Beloved neighbours, both by place and by the love which we have clearly perceived and oft partaken in, should human force compel you to remain here, know that we would offer both counsel and aid. Yet, before the supreme will and divine power, none dare oppose. The path that appears right to us is as follows: if the saint will not depart from this city, let him remain here, and let him be honoured for all time, so that before the Almighty, both our and your intercession may be found.

The Venetians, calmed by the wise counsel, gently lifted the saint from the ship. At that very hour, all the clergy of Kotor, the nobles, and the townsfolk gathered, their hearts united in reverence. With fervent praise for Christ's boundless goodness, they, alongside the Venetians, joyously bore the blessed martyr, Saint Tryphon, to the place they had decreed for him. Yet the saint would not rest there, for, through a wondrous miracle, he revealed the place where he desired to lie. As they carried him reverently, with solemn church rites, there came a moment when he halted the bearers, and despite many attempts, even from the strongest among them, they could not stir him. Then the eldest of the Venetian sailors, overcome with frustration, addressed the saint in reproachful tones:

– Is this how you repay me, Tryphon, after I have brought thee here from the distant lands on the further side of Romanija? Thou wouldst not journey to my homeland, nor wilt thou permit us to place thee where the good people of Kotor wished to lay thee to rest.

And lo, as the sailor spake those words, dishonouring the holy martyr, his mouth turned about and cleaved unto his ears. Despite the fervent pleas and solemn promises of the people, who vowed to revere his virtue and begged him to reveal once more his mighty power, the saint, by his will, caused the sailor's mouth to return unto its rightful place. Thus, to all who beheld, the saint did manifest his divine purpose, showing that he had come unto them for the salvation of souls.

As this miracle came to pass, and when the thanks had been graciously spoken, a man of noble blood and great wealth, by the name of Andrija Saracenis, a soul of great merit, bestowed upon the Venetian sailors treasures of great worth, and they set sail for their homeland in honour and joy. Thereafter, this same nobleman, at the

very spot where the saint had paused, at his own expense and that of other noble citizens of the city, did raise, as best he could, a church in honour of the blessed martyr Tryphon, a sanctuary adorned with many precious gifts. Thus, the Almighty, through the aid of strangers, brought this holy martyr to the city of Kotor, to be its protector.

How The Mole Came to Be

In Pješivci, in the days of old – so old the memory wanes – there lived two brothers, dwelling together under one roof. But the day came when they could no longer abide one another, for the elder brother dealt ever unjustly with the younger, and the younger at last asked that they divide what was theirs. The elder agreed, yet in all things he sought to twist the measure to his own gain, doing his brother wrong at every turn. He schemed so that the greater and fairer parcels of land might fall to his own lot – fields broader, nearer, and better suited for the plough.

When all was divided, there remained still the portion of land called the Mounded Dale, and the younger brother thought the time had come to part that as well. But the elder brother seized it swiftly and declared:

– Behold, all is parted as befits true brothers. Upon my soul, I have done thee no wrong in the division!

– And what of the Mounded Dale? – asked the younger, astonished.

– What with the Mounded Dale? It hath already been marked for my share, and it is now mine by right! – cried the elder, leaping up.

– Why, not a word of it was spoken until this very moment! – gasped the younger in dismay.

The elder brother would not so much as listen: the land is divided, and so it is divided, he kept saying. The worst part hath already fallen to him, said he, and now his own brother would wrench it all, even the Mounded dale! Thus they argued, proved their points, and quarrelled, for it was too much for the younger brother to bear this injustice. Finally, the elder proposed:

– Very well, brother – nay, stranger – let us do this: on the holy Sunday, ere the sun rises, we shall ask the land itself, and it shall tell us whose it is. We shall call upon twelve witnesses, and before them I shall beseech the earth that it alone shall give judgment. If it speaks that it is thine, then let it be thine, and may it bring thee fortune! But if it speaks that it is mine, then my justice shall have been delivered!

– Art thou mad indeed? How shall the earth speak? – cried the younger.

– If it speaks not, then let it be as thou wish, and it shall remain thine!
– replied the elder.

The younger brother, certain that such a thing could never come to pass, agreed, and thus they settled the matter.

On the eve of Sunday, the elder brother went to the Mounded Dale at midnight, taking with him his son, a lad of ten years. There, in the midst of the dale, he dug a pit, placed his son within, and instructed him, saying: “When thou hearest me swear and ask the earth to declare whose it is, thou must answer: “Thine, whose else should it be?” I shall ask thee thrice, and each time thou must speak thus.” Then he placed beams above the boy, covered him with earth, and neatly pressed the soil. He left but a tiny, inconspicuous hole through which air could reach his son. Afterwards, he carried away the remaining earth, tidied the place, and set it so that no trace of change could be seen upon the meadow.

The following day, the brothers went together to the Mounded Dale, accompanied by twelve witnesses. The elder brother knelt upon the earth and swore:

– O Earth, I beseech thee by the God who created thee, by the sun that warms thee, and by the sky that sends thee rain, tell us: whose art thou?

And from beneath the earth, his son answered:

– Thine, whose else should it be?

– Hast thou heard, brother? Have all ye heard? – cried the elder.

– Indeed, we heard! – they answered, though not in unison, their voices mixed with wonder at the great miracle they had witnessed.

When the words were spoken two more times, they all declared to the elder brother that they had indeed heard the land, and it was certainly his by right. Afterwards, they parted and went home, while the child remained beneath the earth to await the night, when his father would come and lift him out, covering the hole once more.

With the first dark, the elder brother went to the Mounded Dale, approached the spot where his son had been hidden beneath the earth, removed the soil, and lifted the beams. But lo and behold – the hole was empty. A great fear gripped him, and he began to call for his son. The child answered from somewhere afar, beneath the earth! He ran in that direction, calling again, when once more the boy responded from the other side, still beneath the earth. And thus, all through the night, he called and ran back and forth across the Mounded Dale, yet the child always answered from another place. When the morning light broke, weary and worn, he saw that throughout the entire Mounded Dale, molehills had risen from the

earth, mounds he had never seen before. At that moment, the child ceased to answer as he had been transformed into a mole. From now on, each night, the elder brother would return to seek his son. This is how the mole came to be.

The Springs of Lukavica

The folk who dwelt about Mount Lukavica could never reckon the number of springs upon it, for they would now burst forth, now vanish, appearing in ever different places. Yet once it so happened that, by chance, they learned the true number.

Not far from the village of Ljuta lies Mount Tali, wherein, within a cave, there dwelt two fairy-sisters. They had caught a wild young billy goat, whom they named Štikoje, and they tamed him. The little goat lived with them and brought them much merriment, and they grew fond of him. But as he came of age, he took to descending into the village by night, laying waste to the cabbages and other crops. The villagers took notice and began to hunt him down, seeking to slay him, but he would always elude them and return to the fairies. At last, the hunters caught him beneath Mount Tali, crept close so that the goat might not sense them, and slew him at a place called Katli. Nightfall overtook them there, and they dared not look for their way back through the black wood for fear of the fairies. So they chose to pass the night upon a clearing, lying down in such a manner that each tucked his feet into the other's trousers, so as to fashion one body with two heads.

When Štikoje returned not, the fairies called out for him and set forth down the mountain in search. There in the glade, they chanced upon the hunters wrapped in slumber. Then one fairy said:

– By the seventy and seven springs upon Lukavica, never have I beheld such a wonder! Let us flee! – and the fairies vanished into the woods.

In the morn the hunters returned safely to the village and told the folk that they had heard from the fairy how many springs there were on Mount Lukavica.

Longstrider, Ironbender, Crushall and Petar of the Woodshade

In a cave there dwelt three strange companions. One was named Longstrider, the second Ironbender, and the third Crushall. Naught could flee before Longstrider; whate'er he chased, he would overtake in a flash, with mighty strides that covered hill and hollow, for such was his power, and thus he was named. Ironbender's hands were feared, for naught he grasped remained unbent, be it wood, be it iron, or any other thing, he would twist it with ease, as one might twist a withe. Hence, he was called Ironbender. Crushall's touch was ruin; whate'er he laid his hands upon, he would shatter to splinters, thus was his name rightly earned. Together they lived always, and fed, as the saying goes, like kings.

One day, Ironbender and Crushall set off across the mountain, while Longstrider remained behind to prepare the midday meal. Now, within that cave there lay a deep and shadowed pit to which the three companions had never dared draw near. And as the meat simmered in the cauldron, all at once there leapt forth from that pit a withered old hag, and she cried unto Longstrider:

– Give me, my son, a piece of meat, for this Granny may warm her belly!

Longstrider was taken aback – what business had an old crone springing from the pit? He made to drive her off, but the hag grew ever more woeful and once more begged for meat. Pity stirred

in Longstrider's breast, and he gave her a piece. The old woman devoured it in a flash and asked for another, then a third, and so it went: as long as there was meat in the pot, the hag kept asking, and Longstrider kept giving. And when at last the meat was gone, the hag leapt back into the pit whence she came. Just then, Ironbender and Crushall returned and asked of Longstrider:

– Have you the meal prepared?

– Aye, I have, said he.

– How so, when the pot stands empty? Where is the meat? What have you done with it?!

Longstrider muttered this and that, hummed and hawed, yet still would not tell what had come to pass. And small wonder, for he too had licked his whiskers with a bite or two, handing morsels to the old crone. So the other two were left hungry and angry with Longstrider. The next day, they would not leave him to tend the cooking; instead, it was Ironbender who stayed behind, while Longstrider and Crushall made for the mountain paths.

Scarcely had they gone when the old crone sprang once more from the pit and called unto Ironbender:

– Give me, my son, a piece of meat, for this Granny may warm her belly!

Ironbender marvelled to see her there, deep in the cave, but pity stirred in him, and he gave her a piece. The hag devoured it in a trice, then stretched out her hand once more:

– Give me another, my son!

– Nay, Granny, – said he, – you shall have no more. Off with you now, drag thyself from here!

Then the old hag plucked a single long hair from her head and, with it, bound Ironbender's hands tight. She leaned over the cauldron and began to feast – *slurp, slurp* – until not a single morsel remained. When all was devoured, she unbound his hands and leapt once more into the pit. No sooner had the crone vanished than Longstrider and Crushall returned.

– Have you the meal prepared? – they asked. – Where is the meat? What's become of it? Where have you put it?!

Ironbender spun his web of fibs, gloss and guile – he too would not speak the truth of what befell him. Yet he had not given the meat of his own will, and so tasted none himself, for the hag had bound his hands. Power lays waste to lands and cities.

On the third day, Crushall was left behind, but fared no better than Ironbender. The crone returned, and to him she did the same. Thus, only after the old woman had devoured the meat from each of them did the three at last confess to one another what had truly come to pass.

As they were yet speaking of these matters, there strode into their midst a young lad, barely grown, with the first down of a beard upon his lip. He was slight of stature, and bore the jagged stump of an old sword at his side, and in his hand a mace, heavy and worn. His name was Petar of the Woodshade.

When he heard their talk, he spoke thus:

– Would you, good sirs, have me as your companion? Let us be a fellowship. From this day forth, whatever we gain, by fair means or foul, let it be shared among us all.

– If you're to be of any use, – they said, – then stay with us. But know this, we sit here hungry and heavy-hearted, for some withered hag

springs forth from that pit and snatches away every meal we cook from our own meat. She devours it all, and leaves us naught.

When Petar heard all, he answered:

– Leave the cooking to me for a day, and let me see this hag for myself. Mayhap I can deal with her. They agreed, and so on the fourth day it was Petar of the Woodshade who remained behind to tend the meal.

Scarcely had the three set off when lo! – out from the pit sprang the old crone and cried:

– Give me, my son, a piece of meat, for this Granny may warm her belly!

But Petar answered:

– In a moment, Granny! – and with that, he raised his mace and struck the hag upon the head – *crack!*

The old woman staggered and tumbled back into the pit.

The three returned, and lo – the meal awaited them, sitting upon the board. Petar told them all that had passed, and so they began to speak among themselves, debating who should descend into the pit to see what had become of the crone. “You go!” – “Nay, not I, you do it!” – “No, *you* go!” – “I’ll not, *you* must!” And so they quarrelled, back and forth, until at last it was plain that none but Petar would go. They gave him their solemn vow, swearing upon the jagged blade of Petar’s notched sword that they would not leave him below, but would draw him up again. Then they lowered him down. Petar had bound his heavy mace tightly to his side, and when he reached the bottom of the pit, he beheld a low fire still glowing. Beside the fire the old hag lay stretched, warming her back. Yet, there, by her side, sat three maidens, her daughters, fair as fairies. And no sooner had they seen him, they whispered in haste:

– Who art thou? Move not, lest thou wake our mother!

When Petar beheld the maidens, he bound them with the rope, and the three lads above drew them up.

They were struck dumb by the maidens' divine beauty and straightway resolved to take them for brides. But lo, now trouble began, for the three refused to lower the rope again for Petar. "What use have we to fetch him up," they said among themselves, "only to have him stand in our way, now that we are to wed these maidens?" And so they left him in the dark.

From below, Petar called out with a voice that echoed from the stone:

– O Longstrider! O Ironbender! O Chrushall! For God's sake, lower the rope!

He waited in vain, for the rope never came, and thus he remained trapped in the pit. Seeing that Longstrider, Ironbender, and Crushall would not rescue him, he began to search high and low for an escape. At last, his hands brushed against a hole, and through that hole, by ledge and shelf, inch by inch, climbing through the cave, he made his way upward, until he emerged into another world. He wandered across a field, but soon thirst overtook him. Yet, water was nowhere to be found. As he roamed, he came upon some men digging a well, and he asked them for a drink. They replied that the drought had been fierce, and the only water in the land lay in a river running through the middle of the field. But they warned him of a terrible beast – a serpent-like creature dwelling in the waters, whose tail would strike down any who drew near.

Petar could no longer endure the thirst, and he declared that he would go to the river to drink, asking them to show him the way. The men began to warn him, urging him not to go, for he would surely lose his life. But Petar answered them:

– Either I shall perish, or the serpent. If the serpent dies, I shall drink my fill; if not, I shall lose my soul to thirst.

– If you kill the serpent, – they replied, – so that we may freely approach the river and take what we need, we will give you anything you desire!

When Petar reached the river, he bent down to drink. But the serpent, seeing him, charged with fury, its tail aimed to strike him down with a deadly blow. Yet Petar was not idle – his topuz² was already in hand, and he swung it with great might. *Wham! Wham! Wham!* he struck, until the serpent was no more, broken into pieces. Afterwards, Petar knelt and drank deeply from the river, his thirst quenched at last.

When all saw what had happened, they rushed to the river like bees to honey, rejoicing in their newfound freedom. The people, grateful for his bravery, once again offered him anything he desired. Petar asked for help to return to his world, and they gave him a falcon, teaching him how to carry enough food for both himself and the bird for nine days. They also warned him that once he took flight, he must not look back, lest he fall and perish. Petar prepared himself, mounted the falcon, and took to the sky.

For nine days, Petar flew on the back of the falcon until he arrived in this world. He hastened to find the cave where the three companions who had betrayed him were. Upon entering, he found the group delighting in the company of the old woman's daughters. When they saw him, they were struck with fear and leapt to grab their weapons, but Petar had already swung his mace. Once he had avenged himself, he looked upon the old woman's daughters, who were trembling with fear. He took the most beautiful one by the

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²Topuz is a traditional weapon with a wooden or iron handle and a wooden, bronze, or iron head, a mace (t/n).

hand to marry her, and the other two he took as servants. Then, he returned home. From that day on, the people, upon hearing of all that had transpired, named the cave Petar's Cave, a name it still holds to this day.

Bajo's Field

Once, Bajo Pivljanin³, having tended his flock all day, set out for home, weary. On the path leading to his house, he met his mother, overcome with tears, who spoke thus:

– Bajo, my son, do not go into the house, for the Turks are there. Look, those cursed ones hold your sister in their lap. You better flee, for they will kill you as they did your father! They will slay you, take your sister, and what then shall I do alone in this world after all is lost?

But Bajo, enraged and shamed, drew his pistol and yatagan and rushed into the house. He struck down one Turk at the threshold, another inside, while the third fled. Bajo pursued him to Goranska and killed him there all the same.

That same night, when the Juzbaša⁴ of Goranska learned of what had happened, he sent ten Turks to either kill Bajo or bring him alive. But before dawn, Bajo managed to escape across Miljkovac and reach Brezna. There, he found the hajduks in Strmac and told them his tale, yet they could not believe him. At that moment, a Turk on horseback came by, and to test him, the hajduks sent Bajo to ambush him. He waited for the Turk, cast him from his horse, and slew him, taking the horse, his clothes, and his weapons. Upon

³ Bajo of the Piva region (t/n).

⁴ *Juzbaša* refers to the commander of a band in the old Turkish army (t/n).

witnessing his bravery, the hajduks accepted him into their band. The place where Bajo killed the Turk from then on became known as Bajo's Field.

The Duel at Nehaj

Nehaj is a tall, pointed hill near Sutomore, on the southern part of the Montenegrin coast. At its summit once stood a Turkish stronghold, nearly impregnable for its time. From this came the name Nehaj, meaning “it cares for none.” The Turks kept a constant garrison here – Turkish askerler⁵ – who guarded the Ottoman border.

Once, it so happened that a certain Arab came to Nehaj to serve in the army – they called him the Black Arab. A giant of a man he was, strong of limb and stout of heart. He sent word across the Krajina⁶, calling upon any who dared to face him in single combat. Yet for a long while, none stepped forth.

But a youth from the nearby Montenegrin village of Gluhi Do heard of it and resolved to meet the Black Arab in the field. His companions sought to dissuade him, some even mocking him, for he was slight of build and unknown to fame, though quick of foot and full of fire. Yet his mind was set. And so he made his way to the town of Nehaj.

When the lad arrived, word was sent to the Black Arab that a warrior awaited him in the field below the town, calling him forth to share the duel. The Black Arab rejoiced, took up his arms, and came down into the field – but when he beheld a slight young man, scarcely more than a stripling, he burst into laughter and mockery.

⁵ *Askerler* is the Turkish plural for asker, a soldier (t/n).

⁶ *Krajina* is a South Slavic word for borderland (t/n).

– Poor child, – he said, – what brings thee here to throw thy life away? Dost thou not see I could crush thee with but my little finger?

– I have come at thy summons, – the youth replied, – to share the duel with thee. And if thou hast the strength, stand before me now!

– Then *bujrum*⁷! – cried the Black Arab, and with that, he rolled up his sleeves, drew his sword from its scabbard, and rushed upon the youth to strike him down.

The youth swiftly bent aside, and the sword's blow whistled past him. Then, reaching into a pouch where he had earlier placed a mix of crushed hot peppers and ashes, he cast the powder into the Black Arab's eyes. The man went blind, squeezed his eyes shut, and began to rub them, staggering as though he would fall. The lad seized the moment, swung his sword, and struck down the Black Arab, thus winning the duel.

And from that day forth, the brotherhood from which this brave youth had sprung bore the name *Mišljeni*⁸ – for it was he who had devised the means to vanquish the Black Arab in a single combat.

⁷ *Bujrum* is a Turkish loanword, originating from *buyurun*, used in the Balkans, meaning “come forth”, “go ahead”, or “be my guest” (t/n).

⁸ The surname *Mišljeni* is derived from the verb “*domisliti se*”, meaning “to think up”, “devise”, referring to the youth's cleverness in outwitting the Black Arab during the duel (t/n).

The Sons of Raza Kalimanov

At the urging of the commander of the Turkish army that came to conquer Montenegro, a mighty Arab called out Ivan-beg Crnojević himself to single combat – or, if he would not come, to send another in his stead, that the victor might bring glory to his army.

Ivan-beg thought this a way by which he might drive the oppressors from his land, and he wished to meet the challenge. But the people forbade their lord to risk his life, and so he began to search throughout his realm for a warrior who might slay the Arab. Then, before Ivan-beg stepped forth Raza Kalimanov Petrušinović⁹ of the Bjelopavlići, famed for his valour, and he said:

– My lord, grant me leave to take thy place upon the field. Though age draws near, I still trust in my strength, and I have a brood of grown sons, so it matters not if I fall!

Ivan-beg pondered and said:

– I know well thy bravery, and I am willing that thou go in my stead, but on this field, thou must not fall.

And so, on the appointed day, before the two hosts, Turkish and Montenegrin, the duel was joined between the Arab and Raza Kalimanov. Both were large and mighty men, warriors of great renown. Long did the battle last. They wrestled across the plain and

⁹ The son of Kaliman Petrušinović (t/n).

struck at one another with fierce blows, but in the end, Raza drove the Arab back against a crag and smote him down. For this deed of valour, Ivan-beg gifted Raza a great estate and a *katun*¹⁰ on Mount Prekornica.

Raza Kalimanov was a widower, and he had six sons, each of them tall and comely, stout of limb, and bold of heart. They would drive their flocks up to the heights of Prekornica, where they grazed their sheep and hunted across the mountain slopes. Years slipped by, yet none of them took a wife. Raza would plead with his sons to marry, offering counsel and entreaty, but all in vain. They would ever evade him, saying the time was not yet right, that the maidens he spoke of did not please them – and thus they would find one excuse or another, ever justifying their delay. When word of this reached Ivan-beg, he was both grieved and angered. And so he approached unto Raza Kalimanov, saying:

– Why don't you not marry thy sons, that they may bear offspring, strengthen thy house, and fortify my realm?

– Alas, my lord, I too lament this, but they will not heed me. Their hearts are bound to the mountain thou bestowed upon me, and they cannot tear themselves away from it, nor cast their gaze upon any maiden!

– Marry thy sons, Raza, lest such noble falcons as they be are lost to the winds, and thy brave lineage fade from this earth!

Raza Kalimanov, in his anger, seized upon the matter. He forced his six sons into marriage, binding them to the fairest of maidens from the finest houses. But on the third morn after the weddings, none of Raza's sons was to be found at home, nor in the bridal chambers

¹⁰ *Katun* is a summer hut or settlement in the mountains where Montenegrin villagers traditionally spent the summer months with their cattle (t/n).

with their new wives. Raza gathered the people of his household, and set forth to seek his sons.

The trail led them to a cave, aflame with a fiery, crimson light. Upon entering, they were struck with a sight most grievous: in the heart of the cave lay the lifeless bodies of Raza's six sons, and above them wept six mountain fairies, tearing their hair as they mourned. The fairies, angered by the sons' betrayal, for they had abandoned them and taken wives, had lured them once more into the cave and slain them. Now, they knelt, wailing in sorrow over the dead. Upon seeing this tragic sight, Raza, filled with fury, drew his sword, and with his men, he rushed forth to slay the fairies. In the ensuing battle, they struck down five of them, but one – the one who had torn Raza's youngest and most handsome son from the breath of life – managed to slip from the cave and flee, making her way up the mountain of Lisac.

When Ivan-beg heard of the grievous fate that had befallen Raza Kalimanov, he urged him to take another wife, that he might again have offspring, and thus ensure his heroic lineage would not be lost to time. Raza, though unwilling, was persuaded by Ivan-beg's counsel, and so he took a wife once again. This new wife bore him a son, strong and comely, who in all ways resembled the youngest son whom the fairy had slain and fled from. As the boy grew, his strength and beauty flourished, and though he was but sixteen years of age, he already stood as a man in both might and appearance. And so it was that he too began to wander the heights of the mountain, following the paths the others had trodden.

When one day, his son did not return, Raza, seeing yet another misfortune upon him, though now grown old, climbed the mountain of Lisac to search for his son. Long did he wander through the hills, until at last he came upon the fairy's cave. There he found his son

in the embrace of the fairy, as she scattered her tangled hair upon him and caressed him. Raza, filled with wrath, drew his sword and charged toward the fairy, striking her with a mighty blow. Yet, though wounded, the fairy leaped from the cave and fled. This time, Raza did not relent. He pursued her with all his might, following her across the mountain until they reached a place on Lisac known as Potrk. There he overtook the fairy, slew her with a final strike, and buried her on the very spot. As soon as he returned home with his son, Raza arranged a marriage for him, and from that union sprang a great kinship, known as the Razići. To this day, in the place of Potrk, on Lisac, the grave of the fairy remains, and the place is known by its name: the Fairy's Grave.

Đoko, Nikola's Son and the Fairy from Komovi

Đoko, the son of Nikola Popović from Medun, in the land of Kuči, was taking his sheep up into the mountains, heading to the Komovi. His katun stood near a spring. One day, after watering his flock, he came upon the Komovi Fairy at the spring – bathing. At first, he was taken aback, thinking he had stumbled upon some beautiful shepherdess at an inopportune time. But as he drew closer, he saw that it was, in fact, a fairy. When she noticed him, the fairy barely managed to snatch up her gown, which had been lying beside the water. With nothing else to cover herself, she quickly wrapped herself in it, then fled up the mountain. Đoko followed the mountain path she took and saw her disappear into a cave along the road. He sought her relentlessly, but she vanished into hiding for several long days. However, as he had become dear to her, she could not bear to stay hidden forever. Eventually, she began to emerge from the cave, sitting on a rock where he could see her. When Đoko caught sight of her, he made his way toward the cave. The fairy welcomed him with open arms and invited him inside. From then on, Đoko often visited the fairy in her cave. Some shepherds noticed his comings and goings, as did his daughter-in-law Jana, but none of them dared speak of it to Đoko's wife, Sava.

One evening, Đoko's sheep returned to the katun alone – there was no sign of Đoko. His wife, Sava, and her sister-in-law, Šajka, grew anxious, fearing some ill fate had befallen him, and resolved

to ascend the mountain in search of him. Đoko's daughter-in-law, Jana, suspecting that he had spent the night with the fairy, tried to dissuade them from this course, telling them that her father-in-law had most likely tarried in some of the summer huts, but her words had no effect. As they journeyed on, they noticed a light coming from a cave in the distance and made their way toward it. Upon entering the cave, they found Đoko sitting by the fire with the fairy. When he saw them, Đoko said:

– You've done well to come! – And he stood up to leave with his wife and sister-in-law.

The fairy said nothing but kept sitting there, tending to the fire.

His wife, Sava, forgave Đoko for his dalliance with the fairy, knowing that she had enchanted him. Yet, she counselled him to keep his distance from her whenever he went to the mountain, for the fairy might bring him to ruin.

The next day, Đoko took the sheep up the mountain, but in the evening he did not return to the katun. Once again, they set out to search for him, but not a sign of him was to be found, not even in the fairy's cave. He had vanished without a trace; the fairy had surely brought him to his end.

The Marriage of the Fairy from Komovi

In Kom, in Medun, Komnen, the banner-bearer, took an oath that he would marry neither a maiden nor a widow but a fairy. His mother then bade him how to accomplish this: on the feast of Saint George, he was to journey unto the mountains, to the Rikavačko Lake, southward of Kom, where the fairies would gather to bathe upon that sacred day, and there he would choose the one most to his liking and steal her winged garments.

So, on St. George's Day, Komnen made his way to Rikavačko Lake, where he hid behind a bush and watched the fairies bathe. He chose the one most to his liking, stole her garments, and fled home. The fairy saw this, and at once set off in pursuit, reaching his house. From that day forth, she lived with him and bore him four sons and two daughters.

When the time came to marry off their eldest son, the wedding feast began, and a circle dance was formed among the guests. Komnen then called to the fairy to join in the dance:

– Dance with us, my fairy!

– I would dance, – she replied, – but I cannot without the gown you took from me and locked away in the chest. If you desire me to dance, you must return my gown unto me.

Komnen, moved with pity, took the gown and gave it to her.

Indeed, in the midst of the *guvno*¹¹, the fairy led the dance three times. But on the fourth turn, she swept up the middle son and daughter, tucked them beneath her wings, and soared into the sky with them. When Komnen saw the fairy take flight, a deep regret gripped him for having given her the gown, knowing well it could never be returned. Left with his youngest son, still but an infant in the cradle, fear overtook him, and he cried out after her:

– What shall I do now with the child in the cradle?

– Give him a drink from that silver gourd, and he'll no longer need to suckle!

Hardly had Komnen obeyed the fairy and given the child a drink, when the little one soared after his mother. When the eldest son beheld this, he too implored for a draught from the silver gourd so that he might follow his fairy mother's flight. But he was loath to leave behind his young bride, and thus he stayed.

¹¹ *Guvno* is a traditional gathering place in rural settings (t/n).

Fairy's Crossing

The Pavkovići-Brajovići dwelled beside the Zeta River, between the families of Petrušinovići and Martinići, and they held land also on the right bank of that river. There, between Jlenka and Kosić, lay a crossing, where people would traverse the river on a raft. Yet, a strange force from the waters would often pull at the raft, capsizing it, and many would drown. Though they fortified the raft and tethered it, that same force from the water would again overturn it.

It was just before dawn when one of the villagers approached the bank of the Zeta, seeking a pouch of money that had fallen into the tall grass after he had leapt off the raft. As he moved the grass, searching here and there, the first rays of the sun revealed a strange sight: from the whirlpool rose a black horse, marked with white streaks around its legs and a star on its forehead. Stunned by this wonder, the man hid behind a willow and continued to watch. The horse neighed, and soon after, the mares that were always grazing near Zeta neighed in response. As the black horse stepped onto the meadow, the mares gathered around him, and he began to nuzzle them. Suddenly, with a neigh, he leapt upon one and copulated with her. When he dismounted, he turned, kicked her in the belly with his hind legs, and then hopped back into the whirlpool, vanishing beneath the water.

Having learned of the horse, the villagers thought that the stallion was the one shaking and overturning the raft, and they planned to capture and punish him. But then it came in a dream to one of the Brajović brethren that a wicked, solitary fairy lived in the whirlpool, cast out from her lake by her companions. In a dream, an old man with a white beard down to his waist appeared to him and spoke: "That fairy overturns the raft and drowns the people. If you wish to rid yourselves of this misfortune, you must capture the fairy, and this can only be done by one who rides a horse that dives, just as her black stallion does, and crosses the whirlpool. Such a horse can be obtained from the same stallion as his offspring. Thence, do not allow him to strike the mare in the belly when he mates with her, for she will remain barren. Someone must hide among the willows by the whirlpool, holding a pot in their hand. When the fairy's stallion mates with the mare and begins to dismount, throw the pot at him. He will startle and will not strike her again. If this be done, the mare will not remain barren, and when the time comes to foal, she will bear a colt just like him. When the colt reaches three years of age, shoe him with nails and hooks, and let someone mount him, then leap into the whirlpool." The old man spoke no more, and vanished from sight.

This Brajović told the peasants all, and they agreed that he should do as the old man had instructed him in the dream. Before dawn, he hid behind the willows by the pool and began to wait, holding an old kettle in his hand. When the fairy's stallion rose from the water and neighed, the mares grazing nearby stamped and gathered around him. The stallion then leapt upon one of the mares and mounted her, but when he began to dismount, Brajović threw the kettle toward him, and the stallion, startled, leapt into the water, failing to strike the mare.

The mare remained with the foal, and after a year, she bore a colt who was the same as the fairy's stallion. When the colt reached three years, they shod him with nails and hooks and brought him to the very pool. Brajović mounted the stallion and drove him into the whirlpool, though he knew not what would happen, for the old man had not told him all in the dream. As the horse sank deeper, he too was pulled down into the water, and then some force began to drag him further below, yet he fought and held tightly to the mane. With great effort, he managed to surface, and on horseback, he emerged on the opposite shore. There, the fairy's hair had tangled in the hooked nails with which they had shod the stallion. They seized the fairy by her hair and pulled her from the water, and as soon as they did, she perished.

From that day forth, the rafts no longer overturned at that crossing. The people named this place the Fairy's Crossing, but it is now called Jugović's Crossing, after some Jûgo who once had mills there.

The Fairy of Fundina

During the battles between the Kuči tribe and other Montenegrins against the Turks, which were often fought in those regions, signs appeared that proved to be of great help to the Montenegrin army. While the battle raged, red and white banners would always wave on the heights of Kuči: the red ones marked the positions of the Montenegrins, and the white ones those of the Turks. The Turks could not see these banners, but the Montenegrins always knew where and when any part of the scattered Turkish forces in the hills and rocky terrain were located, where they advanced or retreated, and where their main forces were positioned. If the banners ever became mixed up or fluttered, it signified a great massacre and a dire struggle for the Montenegrins, a call to hasten and lend their aid.

This happened again in the great battle at Fundina in 1876, during which Marko Miljanov¹² always knew how to position the Montenegrins against the vast Turkish forces. The Montenegrins believed that it was divine providence that revealed these banners, aiding their just cause. After the Great War, when the Montenegrins found peace with the Turks, the banners no longer appeared, but the miracle remained in memory – a wonder that brought victories, for which no explanation could be found.

¹² Marko Miljanov Popović (1833–1901) was a prominent Montenegrin writer and military leader (t/n).

Now, a shepherdess of the Rašović family often tended the sheep on the hills of Kuči, alongside Pâša Ivanović. Pâša would sit and talk with her, then leave her alone with the sheep disappearing up Elem Hill, where she would stay for some time. The shepherdess wondered where Pâša was going, why she was leaving so often and staying away for so long. One day, she secretly followed her. She tracked her all the way to a cave on Elem Hill, above Fundina. As Pâša neared the entrance to the cave, a fairy emerged from it: it was as if the sun itself had risen from within, for her dress shone so brightly, and her hair cascaded down her back, reaching to her heels.

– How art thou, my sister, welcome! – cried the fairy, embracing and kissing Pâša.

When they greeted each other, they sat upon a stone before the cave and began to converse. The shepherdess crept closer, eager to hear what they were saying. The fairy spoke of ancient times, of glory and battles, of how, so none could see her, she had raised the banners to aid the Montenegrins, a secret she had kept to herself, save for now, sharing it with her sister. Then, the fairy of Fundina said with a heavy heart:

– Alas, the Montenegrins have made peace with the Turks, and now I sit here and with thee, when you come to visit me, I speak of the days of past suffering and glory!

Upon hearing this, the shepherdess carried the news back to the village, and thus, from this Rašović maiden, the Kuči learned who had raised the banners to aid the Montenegrins.

Novak Debeljević and the Fairy

Novak Debeljević of Kosijer lost his father while yet a boy and was left in the care of his widowed mother, who lived in poverty. Novak was of slight frame and frail of limb, so the spiteful folk would often mock him, even once he had come of age. It would oft be that, while tending his five or six sheep, he would hear them jeer, “Off with you! Can you not see your flock has stripped the mountain bare?” And so he would drive his sheep into some barren wilderness, hidden among the crags.

One summer day, as he wandered with his flock, he espied something lying beneath a tree – something that looked to be a person. As he drew near, he saw it was a maiden of wondrous stature, with a fair face and long black hair flowing like silk. She was fast asleep. The shade she had sought had shifted, and the sun now beat upon her brow. Moved by pity, he drew his sickle, cut a leafy branch, and propped it above her head.

– Who art thou, and what made thee build a shade for me? – she asked.

He told her who he was, that he was watching his sheep in those parts, and said it pained him to see how the sun was burning her brow.

– From thy looks, it seemed thou wert not from this land and perchance had lost thy way around here.

– I can see thou art a good man, – said the strange maiden. – I may grant thee whatsoever thy heart desires. Speak, and it shall be thine.

– I need nothing, – he answered, – save to graze my sheep in peace, without being driven off or reviled.

– And who reviles thee?

– My own folk from Kosijer, may the devil take them all!

– Fear not from this day forth! Go now, strike that tree, – she said, pointing to a thick and sturdy trunk.

He stepped to the tree and, grasping it with both hands, tore it from the earth – along with roots and all – as if it were but a blade of grass.

– Behold, I have given thee a strength no man may match. None shall dare offend thee again.

Then Novak understood she was no mortal maiden, but a mountain fairy from Debeljaci. So, he herded his sheep back toward Kosijer, musing: “Now that I am mightier than those base wretches who mocked and tormented me, I shall repay them all!” As he plotted his revenge, he remembered a great rock that loomed above the village, a boulder so vast no man could stir. “Mayhap I might set it rolling, and crush the village beneath”, he thought, as he climbed the hill. When he reached the stone, he pressed against it, and it began to shift!

– Hold, hold! – cried the fairy, who had flown after him. – If thou unloose that stone, half the village shall be laid waste! I know thy heart is good and just, and I shall be at thy side to uphold thy strength, but strike not thy own, though some have wronged thee. Behold the Turks, the cruel oppressors who plunder thy people. Turn thy wrath upon them, and smite them as thou art able!

With those words, the fairy vanished, and Novak returned to the village to show his strength first among his own folk. If any dared provoke him, he would give but a slight shove and the lad would fly like a pebble on the wind. From that day forward, all held him in awe and praised his mighty strength. And when he had thus silenced the wicked tongues, he went up into the mountains of Romanija, by the road that leads to Constantinople, and there became a hajduk, cutting down Turks and laying waste to their kind.

The Devils Carve a Road

Once, the men of Rovca were hunting wild goats, and they drove them from Smolnik across Kamenik and down to Vragodol, all the way to the foot of Mount Maganik. There, they chased them up the cliffs beneath the cave of Lazma, into a tight pass from which the beasts could go no farther. But as night fell, the hunters could no longer shoot nor press closer through the treacherous rocks. So they resolved to spend the night where they were, guarding the ways out lest the goats slip back, and to surround and slay them at dawn.

Around midnight, from a cave beneath Maganik, there echoed a voice:

– O Dozvan¹³! O Dozvan, may thee be summoned by sorrow, can thou hear not? Canst thou not see how the men of Rovca have driven our wild goats into yonder stronghold in Maganik, and that by morning they will slay them all?

– And what are we to do? – answered Dozvan from a cave on the far side of the river Mrčica.

– Let us gather all of us together and with sledges and hammers break open a way through Maganik this very night, to free the goats!

.....
¹³ *Dozvan* is a personal name also meaning “summoned” (t/n).

Then began a crashing of stone and rumbling below the caves along the cliffs of Maganik, so loud that the mountain itself answered, echoing with the sound. The people of Rovci heard the clamour, which lasted till near dawn, and believed themselves bewitched or dreaming.

When morning came, they climbed the heights to draw near to the wild goats – yet not a single one remained! And lo! Carved into the cliffs and stone were steps, a pathway hewn in the night, by which the goats had fled across Maganik and vanished.

So the men of Rovca were left without their quarry, but the path remained, and to this day, it leads up through Maganik.

The Godmother Oak

In the small village of Pošćenje in Drobñjaci, there once lived a duke named Đuran who was tall, rich, and handsome, and said to be the most beautiful man to ever walk the land. Because of his title, his good looks, and his vast estate, he was famous far and wide. But Đuran had a brother who was unlike him in every way – short, ugly, and frail. This brother spent his life herding sheep through the summers and winters, and though he was already quite old, he had never taken a wife.

One day, Duke Đuran travelled to Šaranci and spent the night in the home of a respected host, who welcomed him as the most honoured guest, doing everything he could to make him comfortable. The host had a daughter, a strong, healthy, and beautiful young woman. Đuran took a liking to her and decided that he would ask for her hand in marriage – not for himself but for his brother – hoping she would be a good match. In those days, it was common for couples to marry without having met or seen each other before the wedding. When Đuran asked for the girl's hand, her father wanted to know whether the Duke's brother was as stately as the Duke himself. Đuran answered, "As you see me, so is he – no worse in any way." Delighted with such a fine prospect, the father agreed to give his daughter to Đuran's brother, and they set the day for the wedding.

On the agreed day, Đuran gathered a grand group of guests and rode off with them to collect the bride. Everything went smoothly, and on the following day the wedding party brought the bride to her new home in Pošćenje. In the evening, many people gathered at the house to celebrate. The bride, however, searched around for a man who resembled her future brother-in-law, Đuran. When she couldn't find anyone who looked like him, she went out of the room to the fireplace. There, hunched over the fire, sat an old man, dressed in ragged, soaking clothes, and shaking with cold, as he had spent the whole day out tending his sheep. He was unshaven, with long moustaches drooping over his mouth, and he was greedily dipping a crust of barley bread into the edge of a stew pot where the fat had gathered. He ate with great pleasure. Thinking him the humblest of servants, she thought it was safe to ask him quietly who her groom was.

– By God, old man, Omakalac, can you tell me for whom I've been brought here?

He looked at her and replied,

– Well, by God, bride, seems there's a bit of a muddle, but you've come for me, this doddering old Omakalac!

When she heard this and looked him over more closely, seeing what sort of man he was, she made up her mind to flee back to her kin. Before dawn, she waited for a moment when no one would see her, and fled the house. When morning came and her absence was discovered, the family and guests understood the trouble. Horses were saddled at once, and the whole wedding party set off in pursuit, hoping to persuade her to return. They caught up with her at the top of the Ivica Mountain, near an old, large oak tree. There, they begged and pleaded for her to come back. But the bride, furious

at Đuran for deceiving her by saying his brother was no uglier than him, resisted with all her strength. Eventually, she agreed to return, under one condition: at the wedding ceremony, the guests had to say “Amen” three times in response to her words. They agreed and during the ceremony in the church, she said:

– May everything born of the old man Omakalac resemble Duke Đuran, and everything born of Duke Đuran resemble the old man Omakalac!

The guests replied,

– Amen!

And so it was, repeated three times.

After they married, she lived with the old man Omakalac and had six sons, all of whom were said to resemble her brother-in-law, Duke Đuran. Meanwhile, Đuran’s descendants were said to resemble the old man Omakalac.

As this family grew and prospered, they became too numerous for the village of Pošćenje, and so they split up. The descendants of the old man, who were stronger, stayed in Pošćenje, while Đuran’s descendants moved to the rocky Duži. The two families, the “Omakalovci” and the “Đuranovci,” remained divided. The large, ancient oak tree, where the wedding party had pleaded with the bride to return, was later called The Godmother Oak¹⁴.

¹⁴ The toponym “Kumina Bukva” refers to the tree’s guiding significance in the narrative rather than a literal godmother figure (t/n).

The Maiden's Stone

It once came to pass in the lands of Jezera, near the field of Vrtoč, that two wedding parties met upon the road. One, smaller in number, was leading a maiden of rare beauty; the other, greater in number, was journeying to claim a bride. When they crossed paths, the second party, who had not yet taken their bride, beheld the maiden and saw that she was far lovelier than the one they had set out to wed. They exchanged glances and came to a wicked accord – that they would seize this girl and take her as their own, turning back from their former road.

And so it began – a sudden clash of swords and cries, blood upon the earth. The bride's brothers-in-law drew her beside a great stone that stood near the path, that they might better shield her from the would-be thieves. Thus, the fiercest fighting raged around that stone, and there the most fell deaths were met. The maiden looked on in horror as, one by one, her kin fell before her eyes, for the attackers were mightier. When her eldest brother-in-law at last fell to the dust, her heart grew heavy with dread, for she knew then that the cruel ones would soon lay hands upon her. So she turned to the stone, pressed her lips against it, and cried with all her heart, begging:

– O stone, by God and all that is sacred, I beseech thee! Open to me and hide me within, that I may not fall into the hands of these violent men!

And her prayer was heard – the stone parted, and she stepped into it. And no sooner had she entered than the stone sealed itself shut again.

When the battle had ended and all her kindred lay slain, the attackers started searching high and low for the maiden, but there was no trace of her. Perplexed and troubled, they cried out:

– It is as though she vanished into stone!

And so it was indeed – though they knew it not. From that day forth, the stone has been called The Maiden's Stone¹⁵, and by that name it is known even now.

¹⁵ Originally “Đevič kamen”, derived from “đevojka”, a maiden or a young woman (t/n).

Manito Lake

In Brnjik, on the Lukavica mount, there is a deep Manito Lake¹⁶, whose waters are ever green. In this lake, there dwelt spirits in the shape of animals. It once happened that, while a flock of sheep grazed near the lake, a black ram with upright horns emerged from it. He leapt onto the sheep and covered them all before returning to the lake. The same occurred the following year. Then, one time, when the sheep were with their lambs in the same pastureland, the ram jumped out of the lake and bleated. As soon as he bleated, all the lambs dashed after him and leapt into the lake, never to return from under its depths. The same happened to the mares that came to drink from the lake. From the waters, a golden-winged, dappled horse sprang forth and mated with the mare he desired, then returned to the lake. The following year, when his foal was near the lake with its mother, the golden-winged horse leapt from the water once more, and when it neighed, the foal ran after him and sank beneath the waters.

From that time forth, people ceased taking their flocks to drink or graze near Manito Lake, and none did ever venture to bathe in its waters again.

¹⁶ *Manito* means “crazy” or “mad” in certain dialects. In this context, it likely refers to the lake’s eerie or mysterious nature (t/n).

The Zduvači of Ceklin

Long ago in Ceklin, there lived a zduvač¹⁷ who had long been the mightiest of them all. But age caught up with him, and in one of the battles, other zduvači overcame him, so that he returned home wounded and took to his bed, breathless, and bent with pain. The people there brought him all manner of remedies and offerings, but he would accept none, knowing it was all in vain. At last, he sent everyone from the house save one – his brother, a renowned warrior – and said to him:

– Brother of mine, I am dying, and die I surely shall unless someone swiftly takes my place. And I believe you might do it, for you are brave of heart, and in saving me, you would serve us both.

– I will, dear brother, I shall do whatever you ask for your sake and for the good of us all.

– This is what you must do: you must go tonight to the three-horned mountain, four hours' walk from here. The way leads through dense forest. When you come beneath a bare cliff, you'll see a steep jut of rock. Descend it as though you were going down stairs, and there, by a clearing, you must wait. It will be terrifying. And so, to fortify yourself, and because you'll need them, take with you your two pistols and the knife in its silver sheath.

¹⁷ A *zduvač* (pl. *zduvači*) is a mythic South Slavic warrior, believed to enter dreamlike battles to protect his community from storms and hail (t/n).

– Shall I take my rifle as well?

– You may take it, yes, but only to give you courage, for it will do you no good. But the knife – be sure to carry it with you.

– Brother, I fear nothing. I could go even unarmed to that place, or with but a razor if it's only one foe, and with weapons I could face a hundred!

But the *zduvač* cut him short:

– Boast not, but leave not the knife behind! When you reach the cliff, the sky will be clear, and you shall see by starlight. All will be still. Then you will notice a wisp of cloud rising from Mount Rumija, and a wind shall rise. That cloud will swell into a great storm, covering the whole sky, and a darkness shall fall such as you have never seen. The wind shall howl and shriek and whistle with a fury like none you've ever heard. Your hair will stand on end, lifting your cap from your head – and I fear you may go mad.

– You know me well, dear brother. You know I am not so easily shaken.

– If you can endure it, you shall see three bulls burst from the storm upon the earth – Lightfoot, Dapplefoot, and Thunderfoot.¹⁸ The latter two will set upon the third, who shall be staggering, already wounded. You must be swift and strike them both with your knife. But take care not to wound Lightfoot, for if you do, it would mean my death. Nor must you let the other two overcome him.

Upon hearing all this, the brother loaded his powder-horn, sharpened his flints, tucked both his silver pistols into his belt, and between them the knife. Then he slung his rifle across his shoulder,

¹⁸ These poetic renderings of the original Montenegrin names – Plavonja, Šaronja, and Galonja – evoke, respectively, a fair one, a speckled one, and a heavy or loud one to preserve the bulls' symbolic qualities (t/n).

filled his pouch with flour, packed his pipe with tobacco, and so set off along the path that led through the dark forest.

When he reached the cliff of the three-horned mountain, the moon and stars were so bright that all could be seen as though by day, and all around was still and silent. He descended the steep rock as if down a staircase, reached the clearing, sat upon a stone, and lit his *čibuk*¹⁹, keeping his eye toward Mount Rumija. Not long after, a cloud appeared – then more and more dappled the sky. Lightning flashed, thunder cracked, the wind howled – and in an instant, everything shifted just as his brother had foretold. So dreadful was the storm that even he felt a shudder of fear, and his hair began to rise.

Suddenly, out of the storm, three giant bulls burst onto the clearing and began their battle, just as it had been said. He drew his knife, sprang toward Dapplefoot, and slashed his neck. The beast staggered and fell. Lightfoot, who had been limping, found courage to meet Thunderfoot, who charged him with long horns – but the *zduvač*'s brother sprang at Thunderfoot and struck him in the neck as well. Thunderfoot too fell to the ground, and Lightfoot pierced both with his horns and let out such a victorious bellow that the whole mountain rang.

Then, in an instant, the storm ceased, and with it Lightfoot vanished. The moon and stars shone forth again, and silence returned. He made straight for home, joyful that he had fulfilled his brother's charge. And when he returned, he found the *zduvač* seated by the hearth, feeding logs to the fire, hale and hearty – as though he had never been ill at all.

¹⁹ *Čibuk*, a traditional smoking pipe, is symbolically connected to the element of air, which aligns with the *zduvač*'s power over weather and winds, enhancing the supernatural character of the figure (t/n).

The Devil's Return to Earth

Before the devil himself returned to Earth, there was but one small devil, a mere imp, who made his way back. First, he dwelt within the devil's realm, finding much delight in observing the creatures that God had created upon Earth. Above all, he was drawn to a man who had raised himself above other beings, pretending to be grand. And as he watched, he longed to journey to Earth, to bring mischief upon mankind. He thus entreated the lord of hell, Satan, to grant him dominion over the Earth.

– What will you do there, poor wretch? – Satan asked, looking upon him with pity. – The Earth was made by God for Himself, and He will cast you back swiftly should you disturb His work. What harm can you do, so feeble and so small?

But the imp, spying in the distance that great man, tall and seemingly strong, said to Satan:

– Do you see that mighty man?

– I see him.

– I will bring him low in an instant!

– Let me see this marvel.

So the imp journeyed to Earth, and, finding the great man walking, he sprang before him. As the man passed, the imp slyly slipped a

small stone into his shoe. At first, the man felt nothing, but as he walked for some time, the stone began to prick at his foot. However, as dusk fell, he had to press on and had no time to stop and remove the pebble, which continued to irritate him. He bore it, step by step, until his foot was sore and swollen, for the stone had pierced deep, and he could walk no longer. He collapsed to the ground and removed his shoe.

Seeing that the imp was far craftier than he had first believed, despite his small and petty mischief, Satan granted the imp's request and gave him dominion over Earth.

The Devil and Saint Elijah

In the beginning, God ruled only over the Moon, while the Sun was in the Devil's hands. Angered by this, God summoned Saint Elijah and said to him:

– How might we trick the Devil and coax the Sun out of his grasp?

– It cannot be done, Lord, – Saint Elijah replied. – You know full well how cunning he is. The only thing left is for me to swear falsely in Thy name.

– What is this thou speak of? Such an act would be a grave transgression! – said God. But at the same time, He thought to Himself: “Without the Sun, neither plants nor beasts can live upon the Earth. And oh, how fine it would be to take it from the Devil, for the sake of My people!” After pondering this, He said to Saint Elijah:

– Go, and do thy best to deceive the Devil. And if thou must, then swear even by My name!

So Saint Elijah took two golden spheres and went to see the Devil.

– Let us have a contest – he proposed, – to see who can roll a golden sphere the farthest!

The Devil agreed, and Saint Elijah rolled first. But he took care to stop close to the shore, so that the ball would roll straight into the sea.

– What have I done?! – cried Saint Elijah, and began begging the Devil to fish out the ball for him, saying he dared not enter the sea, since it was the Devil's domain.

But the Devil stood still, unmoved and silent.

– What is this? You won't fetch the ball, nor will you let me fetch it myself!

– I could fetch it, – replied the Devil. – But methinks, perhaps, thou shalt be too quick to seize the Sun whilst I dive below?

– Why would I steal the Sun from you? Look, I shall swear by God Almighty that I shall not do such a thing.

– Swear it! – said the Devil.

And so Saint Elijah swore, and the Devil hurled himself into the sea with a mighty splash to fetch the ball. But the moment he vanished beneath the waves, Saint Elijah struck the water with his staff and said nine times:

– In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit!

As he uttered these words, the sea froze into nine thick layers of ice. Then he seized the Sun and flew swiftly to God. The Devil heard it all, but he could not break through the ice at once. And when at last he smashed through all the layers, he flew after Saint Elijah, but could not catch him. He only managed to hurl his spear and strike Elijah in the sole of his foot, tearing out a whole chunk of flesh.

When Elijah reached God and laid the Sun before Him, he complained of his wound and begged God to heal it and restore his foot as it was. But God said:

– I cannot heal thy foot. The wound will close in time, but the sole will remain hollowed out. Yet to comfort thee, I shall see to it that, from this day on, all human soles shall be hollowed in the same way! And so it remained, that hollow in the foot passed on through all humankind.

The Crone's Chasm

Pušo, son of Milo, from Gradina in Martinići, kept a katun on Lijeske in the hills of Gostilje – his spring and autumn pasture. There in the katun, he slept in a hut beside the sheepfold. With him he had a mighty hound Garov, black as pitch, who followed the flocks by day and was tethered to the pen by night. Not even a bird could draw near without the beast scenting it and sounding alarm. Above Pušo's katun yawned a deep chasm, of which folk spoke in whispers. They said devils dwelt within, fearing only the black dog unmarked by any spot. Pušo scoffed at such tales and laughed whenever one dared mention devils in the pit above his fold.

But one eve, weary from the day, Pušo locked his sheep in the pen and lay down to rest in his hut. Come dawn, he woke trembling with cold, bewildered to find himself lying atop the hill above the chasm, battered and sore, with no notion how he'd come there or what had passed in the night. When this befell him time and again, he grew afraid and spoke of his plight to neighbours.

– O Pušo, Pušo, – they told him, – you would not heed the warnings, but it is the devils from your very own chasm that carry you hence!

What most troubled him was how the hound perceived nothing – gave not so much as a growl – though something, or someone, was carrying Pušo from his hut each night. One evening, driving his sheep past the chasm, with the hound behind him, Pušo resolved to cast a

great boulder down into the pit, to hear how long it might fall and what might follow. He hurled the stone, and it struck something deep below with a dreadful crack. At once, from the darkness flew forth bats and wild birds – jackdaws, ravens, crows, and others besides. And then, from the depths, there sprang a monstrous woman – her black hair loose and hanging past her knees, her heavy breasts slung over her shoulders. She cried out:

– What’s this you’ve done, brother Pušo? You’ve upset my pot of milk, and scalded the little ones! Were it not for that hound unchained behind you, I’d have flung you down myself, that you might see what lies within – and never rise again!

Pušo shouted to the dog:

– Seize her, Garov, seize that crone!

The hound gave chase, barking furiously, and the crone vanished back into the chasm. Garov leapt in after her, and was never seen again.

But from that day forth, Pušo was no longer taken from his hut onto the hill. And ever since, folk have called that place The Crone’s Chasm.²⁰

²⁰ Originally “Kedžina jama”, from “kedža”, an archaic or dialectal word referring to a strange or witch-like woman, often portrayed with exaggerated features and supernatural traits (t/n).

The Devil's Wedding Procession

In Drobnjak, in the village of Komarnica, there once lived a man named Malin. One spring, Malin was ploughing and sowing buckwheat, and when the sowing was done, a little of the seed was left over. As the villagers shared a communal monastic mill, Malin took the remainder of the buckwheat there to be ground. When he reached the mill, he found it in disarray: the path about it overgrown, the door ajar, the water diverted from the flume – as often befalls the old monastery mills. After he set the place in order, Malin took off his shoes, waded into the stream, and turned the water into the flume. As soon as the wheel began to turn, he poured in the buckwheat to be ground. Night had already fallen, and within the mill all was darkness. So he stepped outside barefoot as he was to gather wood for a fire, that he might light the place, see whether the flour was ready, and to pour it into a sack.

Just as he gathered the dry branches into his arms, he heard behind him a rumble and a roar. He turned to see what it might be. Alas, there before him stood a group of horsemen – such as he had never imagined in his life, much less beheld: their garments shimmered with gold and strange jewels, and their steeds were so great that a man could scarcely reach the stirrup. The saddles, the bridles, the very trappings of the beasts were all ablaze with gold and gemstones. He stood stupefied, unable to stir, bewildered by this marvel. “Surely these be some enchanted wedding guests, glimmering so bright under the moonlight” – he thought watching them drawing near.

– Who art thou, and what dost thou here? – he was hailed by a wedding guest on his steed, with the tassel of his golden-stitched cap swaying as he spoke.

– I am Malin of Komarnica, and I am here to grind my grain.

– Come, ride with us! Our Uso is to be wed! – shouted a few of the horsemen.

– Good luck to him, I say, but I cannot leave my mill and my grain.

– Fear not for thy grain. There are but six oka²¹ of it and no man shall lay hand to it. Here, take this steed and ride!

And with that, the first rider brought forth a great white stallion, all saddled and adorned in gold and gems.

Malin set down his bundle of wood and stepped toward the steed to mount. He raised his leg to reach the stirrup – but the white steed was too tall. Then that wedding guest led the horse to another spot, thinking it might be easier there, but still Malin could not mount. Again and again, the rider brought the horse to better ground, and again and again Malin failed. All the while, the wedding guests sang and shouted with joy, their songs in honour of Uso – a strange man, unknowable to Malin. And so they went on, he following on foot, ever striving to mount the jewelled steed. The whole journey, for all his toil and striving, seemed but a moment – and at last the rider brought the horse to such a place that Malin might easily mount. Yet he had a habit of crossing himself ere he rode, and this time was no different. Just as he placed his foot in the stirrup, he made the sign of the cross and spoke aloud: “Help me, O God, help me, O God!” And in that instant, the horse vanished. The rider was gone. The wedding guests

²¹ The *oka* (pl. *oke*) is an old unit of weight that was used in the Ottoman Empire and the Balkans. It varies across the region. In Turkey, it is equivalent to about 1.28 kilograms, or 2.82 pounds, while in Montenegro, it measures 1.5 kilograms (t/n).

were gone. And where he had meant to sit upon the saddle, Malin plunged headlong into a lake.

By now the dawn was near. He looked about and knew the place and the land round about it – it was Devil's Lake,²² far from his own village. Great was his wonder that the journey had seemed so short when in truth he had wandered the whole night! And there beside the lake lay his sack of flour. A sharp pain pierced him at that instant, and he saw his feet were in dreadful shape, torn and bleeding. He stripped off his shirt and bound his feet, for he could not take a step, wounded and barefoot as he was. With great struggle and no small agony, carrying the sack upon his shoulder, he made his way to the nearest house. There, they cleaned his wounds and wrapped his feet once more, then, at his request, placed him on horseback and led him back to Komarnica.

Once home, Malin told all that had befallen him that night: how the strange procession of the wedding guests had appeared, how he found himself at Devil's Lake without being aware of the way, though the whole path was known to him; how the journey had seemed no longer than three hundred paces while he tried to mount the great white steed; and how the riders vanished the moment he called upon God. He ordered that the flour be weighed for the strange rider had said there were six oka. And lo! when they measured it, it was exactly so. Malin lay bedridden for more than a month before the wounds upon his feet began to heal.

²² *Vražje jezero*, now situated at the Durmitor national park (t/n).

The Bridge of Bukovica

When the Greeks ruled over Drobnjak, there lived a maiden, a Greek by the name of Marija Sladmedenka. One night, in a vivid dream, a man of strange appearance approached her and told her that beneath a stone slab, on the ancient road that winds through Drobnjak, she would find a hidden treasure. Marija rejoiced, but the man forewarned: "Once thou hast claimed the treasure, build a great stone bridge over the Bukovica river, spanning from beam to beam, to restore the old road above, where now one must ford the stream! Take not a single coin for thyself, but use all the treasure to raise this bridge!"

Upon awakening, Marija wondered if it were naught but a dream, a fleeting vision, and questioned the truth of it. Yet on the following day, before the first light of dawn, she ventured to the place and lifted the stone slab. To her great astonishment, there lay the treasure just as the dream had foretold. As she loaded the riches upon her donkey, she wrestled with the temptation of whether to obey the man who came into her dream or keep the treasure for herself and spend it as she wished. But in that moment, the weight of divine fear seized her heart, and she resolved to heed the bidding of the strange figure and build the bridge. Already in the days that followed, Marija found skilled stonemasons, gathered the people to carry stones, and thus began the noble work of constructing the bridge.

The construction drew great attention, and it so happened that some thieves conspired to steal her gold. They waited for the right moment, cunningly approached, and took more than half of the treasure from Marija. Saddened that she would not be able to fulfil the dream vision in its entirety, she sank the bridge deeper among the beams, thirty cubits above the water, and completed its construction. On both sides of the bridge, she ordered the beams to be notched so that a laden horse could pass through. By that time, on the river Bukovica – where the town of Šavnik would one day rise – there had been no bridge, and when the waters rose in great force, people and horses alike would be swept away and drowned. Thus, she spent all the treasure that remained, and the bridge still stands, for no other bridge exists there.

The Buck and the Gold

In Golija, there lived a man named Kankaraš, who owned a great herd of goats. Among them was a billy goat that spent his days lying upon a large stone slab, never willing to leave it. One day, necessity drove the owner to take his goats to the market in Risan, and with them, the billy goat – though he was loath to part with him. A buyer appeared, and they haggled but could not agree on the price. The owner asked for two talers, an outrageous price at the time, but the buyer refused, saying:

– I would not pay so much, even if this were the very buck that guards a great treasure beneath the stone!

Kankaraš, glad to have failed in selling the goat, and puzzled by the buyer's words, returned home. He sat at the table, deep in thought: "My dear billy always lies upon that stone beneath the great ash tree my grandfather planted. Perhaps I should see if there is aught beneath it." He took his crowbar and pickaxe and made his way to the slab. He struck and struck, putting all his strength into it, but could not budge the stone alone, for it was a great boulder. Then he decided to gather the whole village to lend their hands, and together, with great effort, they lifted the stone, beneath which lay a cauldron full of ducats. And thus, the Kankaraš family became wealthy folk.

Saint Arandio and the Poor Man

There once was a poor man who was left with naught in the world. Misery pressed upon him so heavily that he thought to take his own life, for he could no longer bear to live in such wretchedness. Saint Arandio²³ espied him, and came to him in the guise of a simple man and asked:

– What is it, my friend, that has set you brooding so?

When the poor man told him all, Saint Arandio said:

– Come now, man, lift up thine head. I shall see to it not only that thou livest, but that thou become wealthy! – and then he revealed himself to be Saint Arandio.

The poor man grew frightened and fell to his knees, but Saint Arandio raised him and began to speak:

– Fear not, for God hath sent me to render aid to the wretched. But heed well what thou must do.

And he taught the poor man to proclaim himself a healer, and to tend to the sick – but with great care. For, he said, when he came to the bedside of the afflicted, he would see a white dove upon them. If the dove stood from the waist toward the head, he was never to undertake the healing, for such a one could not be saved. But if the dove stood

²³ *Arandio* is a variant of *Arandel* (the Archangel), a figure revered in Eastern Orthodox Christianity, particularly associated with Saint Michael (t/n).

from the waist toward the feet, then he was to begin at once, for the cure would surely come.

Thus Saint Arandio left him, and the man declared himself a healer. People began to summon him to tend to their sick, and whosoever he saw with the white dove from waist toward head, he would not treat; but those with the dove from waist toward feet, he healed one and all.

And so the wretched pauper became a man of great wealth and famed for his skill. But one day, he too fell ill, and the white dove came to him and stood from the waist toward the head.

– Wife, – said he, – turn my bed so that the dove might look to my feet.

She did so, but the dove leapt again toward the head.

– Turn it once more!

And so she turned the bed again and again, but each time the dove flew toward the head.

And just as he saw that it was of no avail, and that he must die, Saint Arandio appeared at the bedside to take his soul. The man was struck with fear when he saw him, and began to beg that his life be prolonged a few days more, but Saint Arandio would not hear of it, for such was the order of God. Then the man pleaded that he might at least be given time to cross himself, and Saint Arandio promised he would wait.

So Saint Arandio waited and waited, but the man would not cross himself. At last, wearied, the saint said:

– Well then, man, hast thou crossed thyself already!

– To be sure, we made a pact, – said the man. – Thou gavest me thy word that thou wouldst wait.

Saint Arandio saw that the man had tricked him – and divine and royal word must not be broken – and he left, angered.

And so the healer lived long thereafter.

One day, Saint Elias and Saint Arandio were walking together, and Saint Arandio said to Saint Elias:

– Dost thou see that old man they are carrying out into the sun?

– Indeed, I see him.

– Well, no one has ever deceived me as he has! – and he told him all.

Saint Elias laughed and said:

– Why didst thou not tell me sooner? I can make him cross himself this very instant!

– Well then, for heaven's sake, do so!

Saint Elias gathered a wisp of cloud and cast down a thunderbolt at the healer's feet – then another, then a third – and the man, terrified, cried:

– God help me! – and crossed himself.

Then Saint Elias said to Saint Arandip:

– There, he is ready!

Saint Arandio gave thanks and straightaway came and took the man's soul.

The Wife of the Apostle Peter before Heaven

The Apostle Peter set off for Heaven, but took with him neither his mother, nor his wife, nor his sister. They reproached him, but he replied:

– You cannot enter Heaven, for in your lifetime you did no good to anyone. You, Mother, whenever you spun another's wool, you always stole a portion for yourself. You, Sister, did the same with silk when you embroidered the ošvice.²⁴ And you, Wife, you took food from other people's children and gave it to your own!

In spite of this, his wife followed Peter to the gates of Heaven. And when she came there, the guardian at the gate asked her:

- What good did you do on Earth?
- I gave two heads of onions from my garden to a poor man.
- Very well. Those two heads of onions shall carry you in! – said the guardian, and opened the gates.

Then she saw the two onion heads, seized hold of them, and began to ascend. But as she flew upward, one soul caught hold of her foot and begged:

- Take me with you!

²⁴ Ošvice are silk-embroidered ornaments hand-sewn onto women's folk white linen blouses (t/n).

She kicked the soul away and cried:

– Off with you!

But, in that very moment, she too was cast off the onions and fell, finding herself once more before the gates of Heaven.

– You see, – said the guardian, – you could have saved your own soul and another besides, but you would do no good for anyone else, and so you deserve it not yourself. And he shut the gates before her.

The Rains of Cetinje

God divided all His tasks among the heavenly leaders, yet He, as God, simply reigns! So do the kings on Earth, who are nothing compared to Him. To Saint Elijah, He entrusted the clouds and commanded him to watch over them, to observe where the rains were needed, and to send them there.

But Saint Elijah, lost in his great dominion, fell into a deep and constant sleep. Each morning, his attendants, who guided the clouds, would come to him, shake him by the shoulder, and call out:

– Elijah, Elijah!

He would open his eyes slightly and ask:

– What is it?

– Whither shall we send the rain today? – they would ask him.

– Whither we sent it yestermorn! – he would reply, and fall back asleep.

It was the easiest answer for him, no need to trouble his mind or stir his thoughts. And there, it again rained over the Katunska nahija.²⁵

²⁵ *Nahija* is derived from the Turkish word *nahiye*, referring to an administrative district (t/n).

The Springs of Kotor

In ancient times, when a king held court in the city of Risan, on the shores of the sea bay called Boka,²⁶ there were no other settlements nearby. At the southern end of the bay, where now stands the town of Kotor, there was but a pen for the king's cattle. So it remained until the earth trembled in a great upheaval – the mountains above Risan shook so fiercely that the town sank beneath the sea. Even today, the ruins of the old city may be glimpsed along the seabed near the shore.

Fearful that a curse had befallen him, the king sought a new place upon which to build his city anew. High in the slopes above the spot where his pen had stood, the king found a cave, and there he began to dig the foundations. But a fairy of Mount Lovćen saw what he was about and came to him, saying he should not build there – for in that wilderness, there was neither haven for ships nor pasture for horses. Rather, she told him, he should build the city below, by the sea bay. The king heeded the fairy's counsel and, with her help, raised the city beside his cattle pen. And thus, the town came to bear the name after the king's pen – Kotor.²⁷

When the work was done, the king invited many lords and nobles to a great feast. Before them all, he began to boast of what he had done

²⁶ *Boka* means *bay* in the local language; the full name *Boka Kotorska* refers to the Bay of Kotor, a winding bay on the Adriatic coast (t/n).

²⁷ The name *Kotor* is here explained through folk etymology, linking it to *tor*, a livestock enclosure. The actual origin of the name may differ (t/n).

– how he had built this city, and how fine and fair it was. The fairy, hearing this, took offence, for the king had not so much as named her, though it was she who had brought all the stone from Lovćen for the building. She stepped forth and reproached him, saying he could not have done it without her. The king, displeased by her words, flew into a rage and struck the fairy upon the cheek. At that, the fairy grew wrathful. She poisoned every spring in Kotor and sent madness upon all the king's guests. When the king saw how fiercely she had avenged herself, he fell to begging and beseeching her. At last, she was moved to pity, and agreed to lift the madness from his guests, and to cleanse of poison but a single spring – the one just beyond the southern gate of the city. And from that day to this, when summer droughts descend, all the springs about Kotor turn to salt, save the one beyond the southern gate.

Gluhi Do and Sotonići

Beneath the villages of Gluhi Do and Sotonići,²⁸ in Crmnica, stretches Crmničko Polje. At the edge of this field, between the two aforementioned villages, beneath towering rocks, lies a lake known as Velje Oko²⁹, from which the River springs, flowing across the field toward Vir, or rather toward Skadar's marshland. The people remember that Velje Oko once teemed with various kinds of fish.

In a time long past, when Queen Jelena ruled the land, these villages were called Dobri Do and Ljubičevo.³⁰ Near Ljubičevo, Queen Jelena had her summer residence, the walls of which can still be seen today. The inhabitants of Dobri Do, Dobrodoljani, and those of Ljubičevo, Ljubičani, fished in Velje Oko, and from each catch, they had to send the finest and biggest part to the queen.

One day, the Dobrodoljani and Ljubičani made a good catch of fish. Yet, they sent their queen a small portion, and it consisted mostly of small fish. When the queen saw this and was informed by her spies that the catch had been bountiful, she became enraged and ran toward the lake. From a hill, she began calling out to the Dobrodoljani and Ljubičani, scolding them for daring to send her such poor fish:

²⁸ The names of the villages *Gluhi Do* (lit. "Deaf Vale") and *Sotonići* (possibly derived from Satan), legend says, come from Queen Jelena's curse (t/n).

²⁹ *Velje Oko* (lit. "The Great Eye") (t/n).

³⁰ *Dobri Do* (lit. "Good Vale"); *Ljubičevo* (possibly derived from "ljubičast", meaning violet, or "ljubav", love) (t/n).

– Oh, Dobrodoljani! Oh, Dobrodoljani! Why have you sent me such fish today?! – she cried repeatedly, but they did not respond.

The queen grew furious and began calling them by another name:

– Oh, Gluhodoljani ³¹! Oh, Gluhodoljani!

When the Dobrodoljani still did not respond, the queen called out to the Ljubičani:

– Oh, Ljubičani! Oh, Ljubičani! Why have you sent me such fish today?!

But they too remained silent.

At that moment, the queen shouted:

– Oh, Satans! Oh, Satans! Hear me, Gluhodoljani and Satans! May you never catch better and bigger fish in that lake!!!

And so, as Queen Jelena cursed Velje Oko, from that day forward, the lake has only contained small fish.

When the Dobrodoljani and Ljubičani heard the queen's curse, they also became enraged. They had long been upset with her due to the heavy taxes she imposed, and they decided to take their revenge. The queen, frightened, fled toward the town of Bar over the Sutorman mountain, and the Dobrodoljani and Ljubičani chased after her.

When the queen reached the water known as Marko's Well, she turned around to see if the pursuers were close. Upon seeing that they were not far behind, she began tossing small coins behind her in the hope that the pursuers would stop to gather them. This trick worked, and indeed, the pursuers paused to collect the money, allowing her to reach the Barska Krajina safely and without harm.

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³¹ *Gluhodoljani*, the residents of Gluhi Do, the deaf ones (t/n).

The Dobrodoljani and Ljubičani returned to their homes, but from that day on, the people called them Gluhodoljani and Sotonići, a name that has remained to this very day.



MONTENEGRIN FAIRY TALES



Baş-Çelik¹

There was a king who had three sons and three daughters. For a long while, unto his advanced age, he ruled his kingdom justly. When he sensed that the hour was at hand for him to depart from this world, he summoned his sons and daughters to impart his final wishes, instructing them on how to govern the realm for the good of their subjects. Amongst other matters, he urged his sons to grant their consent without hesitation for their sisters to wed the first suitors who should come to seek their hands in marriage.

– Grant your consent, – quoth he – this I bequeath unto you!

Then the king passed away. After a grand funeral attended by the entire populace, it was not long before, one night, someone came to the palace gates and began to knock mightily upon them. The whole court shook; a great clamour arose, with cries and flashes, and it seemed as if a mighty flame surged upward to the heavens. In the palace, the folk were frightened and began to tremble in fear. Suddenly, they heard a deep voice:

– Royal children, open the gates!

To this, the king's eldest son replied:

– We shall not open!

.....
¹The name Baş-Çelik comes from the Turkish words “baş” meaning “head” and “çelik” meaning steel (t/n).

The middle son said:

– We shall not open, not for any reason!

But the youngest declared:

– I say open them! – and he leapt forth to open the gates.

As they opened the gates, there entered something large and winged, from which they could see naught but flames. That which entered began to speak:

– I have come to ask for your eldest sister in marriage, and I would take her with me at once!

The eldest brother collected himself and replied:

– I shall not consent! How can I, when I have not even heard thy name? You wish to take her, yet you do not say whither you shall lead her, so I wouldn't even know where to visit my sister!

Then the middle brother spoke:

– Neither shall I allow you to take our sister this night, whoever you are!

But the youngest said:

– If you two will not, then I shall! – and he took his sister by the hand, leading her to the suitor, saying – May she be fortunate and virtuous!

When their sister crossed over the threshold, a mighty flame engulfed her, and it began to flash and thunder, roaring as the whole palace swayed. Fear seized the courtiers once more. But only a moment later, all was calm; the flames had vanished, and a starry night blanketed the earth. At dawn, the brothers immediately sought any trace of which way that force had departed from the palace, but nothing could be discerned.

On the second night, at the same hour, the same clamour and screeching arose around the palace, and someone came to the gates and cried:

– Royal children, open the gates!

Filled with fear, they opened the gates, when a terrible force entered and began to speak:

– I have come to ask for the hand of your second sister and to take her with me!

The eldest brother said:

– I would not have you take her! I know not who you are nor whither you will take her!

The middle brother said:

– Nor would I!

But the youngest spoke:

– Have you two forgotten our father's commandment!? – he took his sister by the hand and, leading her to the suitor, said:

– May she be fortunate and virtuous!

And so, the mighty force flew away with the maiden.

On the next day, as the dawn broke, the brothers once again searched around the palace for any trace of where that force had departed, but nothing could be found, as though it had never even come!

On the third night, at the same hour, the palace shook from its very foundations with a mighty force and thunder, and a voice cried out:

– Open the gates!

The king's sons leapt up and opened the gates. A vast force entered and said:

– I have come to ask for the hand of your youngest sister!

The elder and middle brothers cried out in unison:

– We do not consent that you take her! Tell us who you are and whither you will take her, so that at the very least we may know where she will live and with whom, that we might visit her as our sister!

To this, the youngest brother replied:

– But I say that our father's word is sacred! – and he led his sister to the suitor, saying – Here she is, may she be fortunate and joyful!

The mighty force enveloped the maiden in flames, and in that very moment, they vanished with a tremendous roar.

After a year had passed without any word from their sisters, the brothers became deeply troubled, wondering what had become of them, for it seemed as though they had vanished from the world. The elder two were angry with their youngest brother and began to speak amongst themselves:

– Dear God, what great sorrow! Not a trace nor a word from our sisters. Where have they gone, and whom did they marry? What has become of them, brother, oh brotherless one!

At last, the elder brothers said to the youngest:

– We have decided to go out into the world to search for our sisters! If thou wilt come with us, we shall forgive thee.

The youngest agreed, and they prepared themselves, took gold coins for the journey, and set out into the world to seek their sisters. As they travelled, they entered a vast mountain covered with dense forest. They agreed to spend the night where there was water, and so they

walked for a long while until, by nightfall, they reached the shore of a small lake. There, they made camp and sat to eat something.

When they were about to lie down, the eldest brother said:

– You sleep, and I shall keep watch.

Thus, the two brothers fell asleep while the eldest stayed awake to keep watch. At some hour of the night, the lake began to stir, and a great wave rose. Then, something rushed toward them from the centre of the lake. He discerned that it was a dragon, drew his sword, and pierced it. The dragon collapsed dead, and he cut off its ears and placed them in his satchel, throwing the carcass back into the water. At dawn, he woke his brothers but said nothing of what had transpired during the night. From there, they arose and continued their journey.

As dusk darkened the sky, they began to discuss that they should again spend the night somewhere near water, for fear of the unknown had overtaken them, having wandered into rugged terrain full of pits and cliffs. At last, they came upon a lake and decided to stay beside it. They kindled a fire and ate what they had, then prepared to lie down. Then the middle brother said:

– You sleep, and I shall keep watch tonight!

The other two fell asleep while the middle one remained by their side, listening to every sound. Suddenly, the water in the lake rose, and something black surfaced. What did he see but a two-headed dragon rushing to devour them! He leapt up, drew his sword from its sheath, and met the dragon. As he wrestled with it, he severed both its heads. Then, he cut off its ears and placed them in his satchel, throwing the rest of the body into the lake. His brothers saw none of this, for both slept soundly through the night until the white dawn.

Then the middle brother cried out:

– Arise, brothers, the day has broken!

The brothers immediately rose, prepared themselves, and set out once more, but they knew not where they were nor in which land. Since they encountered neither a living soul nor even wild beasts anywhere, fear seized them that they might starve to death in that desolation. They began to pray to God to guide them to some house or village, for they had been wandering through the mountains for three days and could see no end in sight. At last, near evening, they arrived at a large lake and agreed not to travel any further but to spend the night there. They kindled a fire, ate what little remained of their provisions, and prepared to rest. Then the youngest brother said:

– You two sleep, tonight I shall keep watch!

And so the two elder brothers lay down and fell asleep while the youngest kept watch, often turning his gaze to the lake. Some time passed in the night when the entire lake began to stir. A great wave rose and splashed upon the fire, extinguishing half of it. The youngest prince drew his sword from its sheath and stood by the fire, and soon, a three-headed dragon appeared, charging at them to devour all three. But the youngest prince, being of a brave heart, chose not to wake his brothers; instead, he confronted the dragon himself. He struck it three times and severed all three of its heads. Then, he cut off its ears and placed them in his satchel, throwing the carcass into the lake.

While he was doing this, the fire had completely gone out due to the waves. Not having any more flint to start a new fire and not wanting to wake his brothers, he wandered about, hoping to see some path or cabin by moonlight. Finally, he climbed to the top of a tall tree to look around. There, he spotted a flickering flame and thought it was not too far away, so he descended from the tree and went to fetch the fire for his brothers. As he made his way, he reached a steep incline and climbed up to the entrance of a cave where a great fire burned. Hearing voices,

he thought he would find hunters inside and stepped in. But what he saw was dreadful: beneath the high arch of the spacious cave, nine giants sat around the fire. All clad in rough skins, they laughed wildly, roasting two men on a spit – one on one side and the other on the other side of the fire – while a cauldron full of pieces of human flesh hung above it, suspended by a thick chain. When the prince saw this, he was greatly frightened. He would have turned back, but the giants had already noticed him at the entrance. And so, with no way out, he cried:

– Good evening, my comrades! I have sought you for a long time!

They all replied in unison:

– Good fortune to thee, may God help thee!

One giant, larger than the others and appearing to be their leader, rose and said:

– What dost thou mean by “my comrades”? How are we thine?

He replied:

– I shall remain with you forever, and I will give my life for you. Therefore, you are my comrades!

– If thou wouldst be our comrade, wilt thou eat men with us and go into battle?

– I will; whatever you do, I shall do as well!

– Well then, since it is so, sit with us, little new comrade!

They all sat again around the fire and began to eat. The prince sat with them, pretending to eat but secretly slipping the meat behind him. Thus, after devouring the boiled meat, the giants consumed the roast as well. Once they were satisfied, the largest among them stood up and said:

– Now rise up, brothers, let us go hunting, for we must eat again tomorrow!

The nine giants seized their weapons, and the prince joined them as the tenth, and they set out for the hunt.

– Where shall we hunt? – he asked the band.

– There is a city nearby where an emperor resides. That is where we have been feeding for many years – they explained to him.

As they approached the city, they uprooted two tall fir trees with branches and carried them to the city walls. They leaned one fir against the wall, and the leader called to the prince:

– Come, little one, climb this fir up to the rampart so we can hand you the other one. Take hold of it and tip it into the city, and hold the top so we can slide down it!

He climbed up and then said to them:

– I do not know what to do; I am not skilled at tipping the fir, so come one of you to show me how it is done.

One of the giants climbed up, grabbed the top of the fir, and tipped it into the city while holding onto the top himself. Once he had positioned it this way, he began to descend down into the city. At that moment, the prince drew his sword and struck him in the neck, severing his head, and the giant fell to the ground. Then he said:

– Now, come up one by one, and I will lower you down here!

Unaware of what had happened to those up on the rampart, they began to climb, and the prince cut down each of the nine giants one by one. He then descended the fir and entered the city. He wandered about but saw and heard no one alive; everything was desolate and silent! Astonished, he thought, “If everyone is sound asleep tonight,

I should at least see or hear someone. The giants must have wiped out these unfortunate people!" As he wandered, he came upon the imperial palace and noticed that in one of the chambers of the tall tower a candle was burning. He opened the door and climbed up to that room. When he entered, he beheld a sight: the entire chamber was adorned with gold, silk, and velvet, yet there was no one inside but a girl lying on a bed, fast asleep! The moment he saw her, his eyes were captivated by her beauty. At the same time, he noticed a snake stretching along the wall, its jaws near the girl's head. The serpent opened its mouth, intending to strike her between the eyes, but the prince drew his knife and pierced it through the head into the wall. He then spoke thus:

– May this knife never be removed by anyone but my own hand!

The prince then hurried to his brothers as dawn approached. He reached the cave where the giants had been, pulled a piece of half-burnt wood from the fire, and, running all the while, he finally found his brothers still sleeping. He then kindled the fire, and soon the sun rose, bringing forth the morning. He woke his brothers without telling them what had transpired during the night, and they prepared to continue on their way. As they journeyed, they came upon a road that led directly to the city where the youngest prince had slain the giants.

Alas, in that city, there lived, until recently, a mighty emperor, who would walk through the deserted streets every morning, shedding tears over the loss of his people to the giants. He feared that his only daughter might meet the same fate. As he wandered aimlessly through the city, he noticed a fir tree, fully uprooted from the ground and leaning against the city wall. When he drew nearer, he beheld a wonder: a heap of nine giants, and every one of them with their heads severed! The emperor recognised the slayers of his kingdom and

rejoiced greatly, while the people gathered to pray to God for the health of the hero who had slain them. At the same time, servants from the palace rushed in to inform the emperor that someone had killed a large serpent that could have poisoned his daughter, which had been poised above her head while she slept. Upon hearing this, the emperor hurried to the palace, straight to his daughter's room. Seeing his daughter alive and well, he embraced her and noticed the serpent pinned to the wall above the princess's bed with a knife. With all his might, he tried to pull the knife out but could not budge it.

Then the emperor commanded that an announcement be made far and wide: whoever was the hero who had slain the giants and whoever had pinned the serpent to the wall above the princess should come before the emperor. If he could prove that he was the one who did it, the emperor would reward him with great riches and give him his daughter as a wife. Furthermore, he ordered that at the inns along the main roads, every traveller should be asked if they knew who had killed the giants, and if anyone did know, they should hurry to the palace to receive the emperor's reward.

Meanwhile, those three heirs of the king who had been searching for their sisters came into one of those inns to spend the night. After dinner, the innkeeper approached them and began to boast about all the heroic deeds he had accomplished in his life, then asked them:

– Have you done anything noteworthy so far?

Then the oldest brother began to speak:

– I set out on this journey with my brothers, and on the first night, we camped by a lake in a great mountain. My brothers fell asleep, and I kept watch. Suddenly, a dragon emerged from the lake and

charged to devour us, and I drew my sword and severed its head. If you don't believe me, here are its ears! – and he took the ears out of his bag and threw them on the table.

When the middle brother heard this, he said:

– When I was keeping watch at the second camp, I killed a dragon with two heads. If you don't believe me, here are the ears from both heads! – and he took out the ears and showed them.

The youngest remained silent, and the innkeeper asked him as well:

– By God, lad, your brothers are heroes, but let's hear if you've done anything noteworthy!

Then the youngest began to speak:

– I have done something small, too. When we spent the third night by the lake, you, my brothers, were sleeping, and I kept watch. Some time during the night, the whole lake began to shake, a three-headed dragon emerged, and it wanted to devour all three of us. I then cut off all three of its heads with my sword. If you don't believe me, here are six ears!

The brothers were astonished by this, and he continued to recount:

– At that moment, the fire extinguished, and I ventured forth to see if I might spy any huts or souls during the night. When I found nothing, I climbed a tall tree and saw a distant flame. I made my way toward it, and as I travelled through the mountain, I arrived at a cave where nine giants were gathered around a fire... – and he told them everything in order of what he had done. They were all amazed by this wonder. When the innkeeper heard this, he quickly ran to the court to inform the king, who rewarded him with gold coins and immediately sent his men to bring all three princes to him. When they came before the king, he asked:

– Which of you three has slain the giants and saved my daughter from death?

– It was I, noble king! – replied the youngest prince. – My knife remains stuck in the wall above the princess's bed, and no one can pull it out except me.

The king then summoned his strongest men, bidding them to extract the knife one by one. Yet, none could prevail save for the youngest prince. The king, thus convinced of the truth of his words, offered him his daughter in marriage, promising that he would stand first beside him. To the two elder brothers, he proclaimed:

– If you desire, I shall wed you to the finest families in my kingdom and erect splendid palaces for you.

However, they revealed the entire truth to him, explaining how they had embarked upon a quest to find their sisters and that they could not cease nor return home until they had found them.

When the king heard this, he bestowed upon the two brothers two donkeys laden with gold coins and sent them forth on their journey, while he retained the youngest as his son-in-law. Thus, the prince dwelt in prosperity with the fair princess. Yet, as time passed without tidings from his brothers, he found himself ever preoccupied with thoughts of his lost sisters and felt a compulsion to seek them out. Though his heart ached at the thought of leaving his beloved princess, the king forbade him from embarking on such a quest, leaving him to languish in longing for his sisters.

One fateful day, the king set forth on a hunting expedition and addressed his son-in-law:

– If you do not wish to accompany me in the hunt, you may remain in the palace, and here are nine keys entrusted to you. These keys unlock nine royal chambers, wherein lies a great treasure. Within

those chambers, you shall behold silver and gold, fine weapons, and numerous other valuables. You are permitted to open eight chambers, but I implore you, do not dare to breach the ninth, for should you do so, calamity shall befall you!

With that, the king rode off with his retinue, leaving his son-in-law behind. As soon as the king had departed, the prince eagerly opened chamber after chamber, revelling in the treasures contained within each. Yet, when he arrived at the door of the ninth, he mused to himself, "I have witnessed many wonders; how can I not unlock this chamber!" – and with that, he turned the key and opened that door as well.

When he stepped inside, there was much to behold! In the room lay a large man, shackled to the knees in iron, both arms bound up to the elbows. At each of the four corners stood a post, and for each post, a heavy iron chain was poured. The ends of the chains were fastened around the man's neck. He was so tightly bound that he could not move at all. Before him was a golden pipe from which water flowed, spilling into a golden trough. Nearby, on a silver tripod, stood a cup adorned with precious stones. The man wanted to drink the water, but he could not reach it. When the prince saw all this, he was staggered and took a step back, when the man in shackles spoke:

– Come hither, fear not, I do swear to thee by the living God!

The prince drew nigh, and the chained man spoke:

– I beseech thee, grant me this boon and deliver this cup of water unto a thirsty soul. And verily, thou shalt receive another life as a gift for thy kindness!

The prince thought to himself, "What could be better than receiving another life?" – and so he took the cup, filled it to the brim, and tilted it to pour into the man's mouth so that the other could drink.

- What is the name you are called by? – he asked the shackled man.
- Baš-Čelik is my name.
- A strange name for a strange man! – said the prince. He wanted to go back to the door, but Baš-Čelik began to plead again:
- I beseech thee, by the Almighty, grant me yet another cup of water, for my thirst is not yet assuaged, and I shall bestow upon thee another life!

The prince thought, “To receive two lives, while already having one, that would truly be a great miracle!” – so he filled the cup and gave it to the bound man to drink. Having done this, he would leave again, yet Baš-Čelik spoke once more:

– O thou hero, return unto me! Having already performed two noble deeds, thou mayest accomplish a third! Take this cup, fill it, and pour the water upon my head, and I shall bestow upon thee a third life, that thou mayest live!

When the prince heard this, he returned, took the cup once more, filled it with water, and poured it over Baš-Čelik’s head. As the water flowed over his face, in that very instant, the chains around his neck shattered, and all the iron that bound him fell away. He leapt forth like lightning, spread his wings, and flew through the window, breaking the shutters. The prince only managed to see as, like a mighty eagle, Baš-Čelik seized the beautiful princess, who was strolling in the courtyard, and whisked her away like a cloud.

At that moment, the emperor returned from the hunt, and as soon as he dismounted from his horse, his son-in-law approached him and recounted everything that had transpired. The emperor grew angrier and more troubled, saying:

– Why did you do such a thing? Did I not tell you not to open the ninth chamber!? Behold, I am now without my only daughter, and Baš-Čelik is once more free to do evil!

– Do not be angry with me for succumbing to my curiosity, – replied the prince. – I shall set forth immediately to find Baš-Čelik and bring my wife, your daughter, back home.

When the emperor saw his resolve, he began to dissuade him:

– Do not go under any circumstances! You don't know who Baš-Čelik is. He laid siege to my empire, and when I witnessed that I could not repel his might, I bound him through deceit. Stay here, for I hold you as my own son, and I shall gather as many troops as I can and set forth to vanquish him and reclaim my daughter.

But the prince would not heed his father-in-law's words. Instead, he took some gold coins, mounted his horse, and set off alone into the world to seek Baš-Čelik. After travelling for a long while, he arrived at a town. As he entered, he looked around, when suddenly, a girl from a tower called out to him:

– Hey, you traveller, dismount from your horse and come into the courtyard! For a ducat, I shall provide you with a room to rest, so you can recover your strength with sleep.

When the prince entered the courtyard, he encountered the girl, and upon gazing at her closely, he recognised his eldest sister. She, too, recognised him, and they embraced, exchanging kisses on their faces. Then his sister invited him:

– Come, my brother, let us ascend to the tower!

Once they reached the tower, they began eagerly conversing about everything that had transpired. Then the prince asked his sister about the man she had married. She replied:

– I married the dragon king, and my husband is a dragon. However, brother, I must hide you well before he arrives, for he claims he would tear his brothers-in-law to pieces should they fall into his grasp. I shall test him, and if he means you no harm, I will speak well of you to him.

Thus she did: she concealed her brother and his horse. When evening fell, behold the dragon king! As he burst into the hall, the entire court illumed and shimmered. No sooner had he entered than he called for his wife:

– Wife, there is a scent of human bones in our chambers. Whom do we have here? Speak at once!

– There is no one.

– That cannot be! – he thundered.

– My lord, permit me to ask you something and speak truly, – she continued. – Would you do any harm to my brothers were one of them to find themselves here now?

– I would slay the eldest and the middle one and roast them, but to the youngest, I would do naught but treat him kindly!

– Well then, my youngest brother has come, and he is your brother-in-law.

When the dragon king heard this, he shouted:

– Bring him here immediately!

The sister brought her brother, and the dragon king leapt up, both extending their arms to embrace one another:

– Welcome, my brother-in-law!

– It's good to see you, my sister's beloved husband!

– Where have you been, and what have you been doing?

– Here I am now with you, having travelled the wide world to find you! – he then recounted everything from beginning to end.

When he heard where the young prince was headed, the dragon king said to him:

– Where do you intend to go, for God's sake, my good fellow?! Are you seeking Baš-Čelik to return your wife to you? – and he burst into laughter. – You should know that he will never give her back; you will have to face him in combat. If you attempt it alone, you will surely lose your head. Just two days ago, he descended upon my kingdom, and I waited for him with seven thousand dragons, but I couldn't harm him in any way. Please, spare yourself the trouble; I will give you as much gold as you wish, so go home! However, the young prince refused to heed the dragon's advice and, on the following day, resolutely reiterated his firm intention. When the dragon king saw that he could not dissuade him from this disastrous path, he took one of his feathers from his wing and gave it to him, saying:

– Listen carefully to what I say: here is my feather; when you find Baš-Čelik and great trouble befalls you, light it on fire. I will fly down with my dragons to assist you.

The young prince took the feather, tucked it into his breast, mounted his horse, and set off. Travelling through the world again, he arrived at another large town, and as he passed through it, he heard the voice of a girl from a tower:

– Hey, you traveller! Dismount from your horse and come to the courtyard! For a ducat, I will give you a room to rest and regain your strength with sleep.

The young prince entered the courtyard with his horse, where he encountered his middle sister. When they recognised each other, they opened their arms, kissed each other, and then she led her brother

to the tower. They spoke at length about everything, and he told her how he had set out into the world with his brothers to search for their sisters, as there had been no news from them. He shared how he had saved a kingdom from trouble and won the emperor's daughter, and how he had parted ways with his brothers, recounting everything in order. Finally, he asked her:

– Who did you marry?

– I married the falcon emperor. He will arrive this evening. But I must hide you well, for he wishes ill upon my brothers.

Thus, she hid her brother. It wasn't long before the falcon emperor arrived. As he descended, the entire tower trembled from the force of his presence. They immediately set dinner for him, but as he approached the table, he spoke to his wife:

– There is the smell of human bones here!

– There isn't, you must be imagining things!

– How can there not be? My sense of smell has never deceived me. Now tell me, woman, who is it?

– But let me ask you something, my husband. Would you do any harm to my brothers if any of them appeared here?

– I would torment the eldest and the middle one immensely, but the youngest I would not harm at all; I would welcome him as an honoured guest into my home and shower him with gifts.

Then she told him about her brother, and he immediately commanded that he be brought forth. When the emperor saw him, he sprang to his feet; both men stretched forth their arms and kissed one another on the face.

– Welcome, brother-in-law!

– May I always find thee in better health, my brother-in-law! – the prince replied, and straightaway they sat at the table to sup.

After supper, the falcon emperor invited his brother-in-law to remain with him. But when the prince declared that he must set forth on his journey at dawn, the emperor inquired whither he was bound. The prince told him that he sought Baš-Čelik and recounted all that had happened. The falcon emperor was troubled and began to counsel him, saying:

– Go not further unless you intend to meet your doom! I shall tell you of Baš-Čelik. A few days past, he flew to the very borders of my realm, and I, with five thousand falcons, met him in battle. Fiercely did we fight, and the blood flowed up to our knees, yet we could do him no harm; we only drove him away from my domain. And you meant to face him alone in combat? Therefore, I counsel you to return to your own home. Here, take gold and treasure – carry with thee as much as you want!

– I thank you for all, but I shall not return; rather, I shall continue my quest to find Baš-Čelik, – the prince replied resolutely.

When the falcon emperor saw that he could not dissuade the prince, he withdrew a feather from his wing and presented it, saying:

– Take this feather of mine; when you find yourself in dire straits, strike a fire and set it alight. I shall then come to thee with my falcons to offer assistance.

The prince took the feather, tucked it into his breast, then mounted his steed and rode onward. As he journeyed through the world, he arrived at a third town. Upon his entrance, a maiden called out from a *čardak*²:

² *Čardak* is a South-European, Mediterranean, and Oriental wooden construction. It has a fortified ground floor, while the upper floors are constructed of wood. It served as both a house and a fortification (t/n).

– Dismount thy steed, traveller, and come to the courtyard! For a ducat, I shall grant you a room to rest and refresh yourself with sleep.

The prince dismounted and entered the courtyard, where he beheld his youngest sister. They recognised one another, outstretched their arms, and embraced warmly. She then led her brother to the tower. After they had shared their tales, the brother inquired:

– Whom have you wed, dear sister? Who is your husband?

– My husband is the lord of the eagles; for him have I taken wedlock. Yet he bears ill will towards my brethren, and thus must I conceal thee.

When the emperor returned home that evening, his wife welcomed him, and he inquired:

– Who amongst mortals hath entered our halls? Speak forth!

– There is none!

– Nay, I perceive the scent of a man!

As they sat down to the feast, his wife ventured to ask:

– Pray, my dear husband, would you do harm to any of my brothers were they to appear?

– I would seize the eldest and the middle brother, raise them aloft into the heavens, and cast them into the abyss. Yet the youngest I would not harm. Him I would greet with honour, offer hospitality, and serve well at all times.

– Lo, my youngest brother, thy brother-in-law, has come to see me!

Then the emperor commanded that the prince be brought forth before him. Upon his arrival, the lord of the eagles welcomed the prince with warm embraces and said:

– Well met, brother-in-law!

– May I always find thee better, dear brother!

They immediately commenced their evening repast, engaging in lively discourse. The prince spoke of his quest to seek Baš-Čelik and rescue his wife, whom he had taken from their home. When the eagle lord heard this, he began to dissuade the prince, saying:

– Flee from this devilry, my dear brother-in-law, and do not tread that path! For you know not the might of Baš-Čelik, a force that even the united empires of this world cannot overcome. Rather, remain here with me; all that thy heart desires shall be thine!

But the prince heeded him not. Upon the morrow, as dawn broke, he rose lightly to his feet, donned his armour, and mounted his steed. When the eagle lord saw that he could not dissuade the prince, he drew forth a feather from his wing and presented it to him:

– Here, my brother-in-law, take this. Should great misfortune befall thee, kindle a fire and set this feather ablaze, and I shall come to thy aid with my eagles!

The prince took the third feather, tucked it into his bosom, and rode forth. As he journeyed through desolate mountains and from town to town, ever further and further, he arrived at a deep ravine. In this stony place, surrounded by cliffs, only the echo of his steed's hooves could be heard. While he rode, he came upon the entrance of a cave, from which suddenly emerged a fair maiden. He immediately recognised his wife, and joy filled his heart as he hastened to her. She, too, recognised him, her heart alight with joy and wonder, and she spake unto him:

– You have found me, my dearest husband! But, alas, you are in great peril, for none may approach me!

Then he recounted all that had transpired, taking her by the hand.

– Now, my wife, let us flee!

Yet she answered him:

– Whither shall we go, when Baš-Čelik shall soon pursue us? He will surely slay you and return me to the cave!

The prince, knowing he had yet three lives to live, gradually persuaded his wife to flee, and so they did. Yet, as the horse galloped, bearing them from the ravine, Baš-Čelik heard their flight and swiftly overtook them.

– O, prince, dost thou dare to steal my woman? – he exclaimed and seized him from his steed, saying:

– I shall spare thy life this time, for I know I promised thee three lives. Now go, and return not to her, lest thou lose thy head!

After uttering these words, Baš-Čelik took his woman with him, leaving the prince alone. Unsure of what to do, the young heir at last resolved to venture once more to rescue his beloved. As he neared the cave, he seized an opportunity when Baš-Čelik departed and sought to take his dear wife with him to flee once more. Yet Baš-Čelik heard their flight and swiftly caught up to the prince. Drawing forth an arrow, he cried:

– Dost thou prefer that I pierce thee with this arrow, or shall I cleave thee asunder with my sword?

The prince pleaded for mercy, and Baš-Čelik replied:

– As I promised thee, I grant thee yet a second life; however, I warn thee, dare not to attempt stealing my woman again, for I shall slay thee on the spot!

After declaring this, Baš-Čelik took his woman away, leaving the prince alone again to ponder how he might rescue his beloved from captivity.

At last, he said to himself: "Why should I fear Baš-Čelik when I yet possess two lives, one which he bestowed upon me and one of my own?" He resolved to return to his wife on the morrow when Baš-Čelik would be absent from the cave.

– Come, let us flee! – he called once again to his wife.

She implored him by all that is holy not to proceed, for it would be of no avail to flee, as Baš-Čelik would surely catch them. Yet her husband swayed her with his words, and in the end, they set forth once more. Baš-Čelik heard their movements yet again and quickly caught up to them, calling out:

– Halt! I grant thee no more mercy!

The prince was struck with fear; he fell to his knees and began to plead for his life. Baš-Čelik paused and spoke:

– I know I promised to grant thee three lives, for thou hast offered me water thrice and freed me from my heavy chains. Thus, I keep my word and bestow upon thee a third life; beyond this, thou hast no more. Go thou back to thy home, and do not squander this gift that God has granted thee!

Seeing that he could do nought against such a might, the prince was disheartened, and so he mounted his steed and departed the gorge. Yet his thoughts lingered upon how he might rescue his beloved wife from Baš-Čelik. Suddenly, the words of his brothers-in-law returned to him – each having bestowed upon him a feather. Thus, he resolved: "I shall indeed return for a fourth time to rescue my cherished wife and lead her home. And if peril should befall me, I shall ignite the feathers to summon my brothers-in-law for aid!"

With this, he turned his horse and rode back to the cave where Baš-Čelik kept his wife captive. Hidden, he awaited and, seeing from afar

that Baš-Čelik had departed, he revealed himself before her. She was astonished and greatly alarmed, exclaiming:

– Good heavens! Do you so loathe living that you return once more for me?!

He embraced her and declared that for her love, he would gladly lay down his life. To persuade her to flee once more, he recounted how his powerful brothers-in-law had each gifted him a feather from their wings, promising to come to his aid should he find himself in peril.

– Thus was I emboldened to return for thee yet again. Come, let us flee forthwith! – And so they took flight. Yet Baš-Čelik heard them at once and cried from afar:

– Halt, prince! Thou hast not escaped!

When the prince beheld Baš-Čelik drawing near, he withdrew the three feathers and flint, striking them together until a small flame ignited all three of them. Yet, whilst he lit the feathers, Baš-Čelik reached him, swinging his sword and cleaving him in twain. In that very moment, behold a marvel! The dragon emperor arrived with his dragons, the falcon emperor with his falcons, and the eagle emperor with his eagles, and they engaged in a fierce battle with Baš-Čelik. Yet, despite their efforts, Baš-Čelik seized his wife once more and fled.

Then the three emperors beheld their dead brother-in-law and resolved to attempt to restore his life. They summoned the three fleetest dragons and inquired which among them could bring water from the Jordan with the greatest haste. The first declared,

– I can do so in half an hour.

The second proclaimed,

– I can achieve it in a quarter of an hour.

The third asserted,

– I can accomplish it in nine minutes.

Upon hearing this, the emperors cried out to the last dragon,

– Now, thou dragon, hasten thy flight!

The dragon spread his mighty wings and vanished from sight. Indeed, within nine minutes, he returned bearing a pitcher of water from the Jordan. The emperors took the pitcher and poured the water upon the wounds where the prince had been severed. As soon as they did so, the wounds healed, and the prince revived. Upon seeing his brothers-in-law, he rejoiced, and they began to counsel him:

– Now, go home in peace, for we have restored thee to life from the dead!

But the prince replied unto them that he would venture once more to that cave to test his fortune and that he might rescue his wife by any means necessary from her captivity.

– Go not! If you depart now, you shall surely perish, for you have no other life left but that which is granted by God. Neither shall the waters of Jordan restore thee from the dead! – thus pleaded his brothers-in-law, yet it was in vain; the prince would not hear of yielding.

– If you are so resolute in your quest, then take not your wife with you at once. Instead, bid her inquire of Baš-Čelik where his strength and power are concealed. When you learn this, return unto us, and we shall aid thee in conquering Baš-Čelik together!

The prince heeded his brothers-in-law and stealthily approached the cave where his wife dwelt. He instructed her to inquire of Baš-Čelik where his strength and power were hidden, and then he concealed himself in a nearby thicket. When Baš-Čelik arrived, the woman began to question him:

– Pray, tell, noble one, where lie your strength and power?

Baš-Čelik replied:

– In my sword!

Then the woman commenced her prayers to God concerning his sword. Upon seeing this, Baš-Čelik burst into laughter and said:

– O foolish woman! My strength and power lie not in my sword, but in my arrow!

She then turned to pray to God regarding the arrow, while Baš-Čelik, still chuckling, remarked:

– O woman, dost thou have some sage teaching thee to test where my strength and power reside? Were it not for the fact that I have slain him, I would surmise that yonder prince is near, guiding thee in thy inquiries!

She swore that no one was teaching her, for there was no one to do so. After several days, the prince crept back to her, and she said that she had not yet been able to learn from Baš-Čelik where his strength and power were hidden.

– Inquire of him once more! – he urged her, and then he departed.

When Baš-Čelik arrived, the woman once again posed the same question, to which he replied:

– Since thou hold my strength and power in such high regard, I shall reveal unto thee the truth of their hiding place. Far to the east lies a high mountain, easily recognised by its three sharp peaks of equal height. In that mountain dwells a black fox, within whose heart lies a bird. In that bird resides all my strength and power. Yet, no one can capture that fox, for it transforms into various shapes.

On the following day, as soon as Baš-Čelik departed, the prince once more visited his wife to hear what she had learned, and she recounted everything to him. Then he went straight to his brothers-in-law, who eagerly awaited his arrival to hear the news. They immediately set out to find the mountain. Upon reaching the mountain with three sharp peaks, they released their eagles to catch the black fox. The fox sensed their presence and fled to a lake in the midst of the mountain, transforming into a six-winged duck. However, the hawks swiftly pursued her and drove her away from there. She then soared into the clouds, with the dragons following behind her. Once she landed, she quickly transformed back into a fox and began to run along the ground, but the eagles and the rest of the army awaited her, surrounding and capturing her. The emperors ordered that the fox be dismembered and her heart extracted. Then, they took the heart, removed the bird from it, and cast it into the fire. As the bird burned, Baš-Čelik perished.

The prince then embraced his wife and went with her to his father-in-law's abode. There, the emperor welcomed them with great delight and prepared a celebration that lasted for seven days and seven nights, attended by the prince's sisters and their husbands. During this time, his brothers returned from a long journey to reunite with him. The prince persuaded his brothers-in-law to forgive his siblings and accept them as beloved kin. The emperor bestowed riches upon them, and they, filled with happiness, set off to divide their father's land among themselves.

The Devil and the Evil Woman

A peasant had an ill-favoured wife. She was so wicked that he could not withstand her. One day, he felt weakened and told his wife that he could not partake of his meal, to which she replied:

– Yes, you can, and if you won't, you may as well perish!

And thus the poor husband was forced to dine against his will. As soon as he had eaten, he began to ponder how his wife heeded him not and how, whatever he would ask from her, she spoke against him in spite and acted contrary. Yet he thought again: "This is not so ill, for it is good for me. From henceforth, whenever I shall have need of anything from her, I shall always declare that I will not or that I need it not, and she shall do the opposite; thereby, I shall fare better with her!"

After he had regained his strength, he set forth to work on his land, and as he departed, he told his wife:

– Bring not my lunch to me.

To which she replied:

– Indeed, I shall, even if you should perish!

"Behold my fortune," thought the peasant, "thus shall I ever speak henceforth," and he went upon his way to till the land.

Near the demesne, by the very path leading thereto, there was a deep pit hidden by low shrubs. He feared that his wife might fall into

it whilst bringing his lunch, so he took a billhook and cut away the branches that covered it. When the hour of lunch came, he beheld his wife approaching. Bearing the provision upon her head, she could not see where she trod, and he grew fearful that she might not see the pit before her. Thus, he called out to her:

– Not that way, wife! Fall not into the pit!

She readily answered:

– Indeed, I shall, even if you should perish!

Thus, she, along with the entire meal, fell into the pit! In this ill hour, the peasant hastened to the nearest houses to seek ropes, and having found a long one at a certain household, he ran back to try to pull his wife out, should she still be alive. He cried out to her, but no voice answered, so he lowered the rope. No sooner had he done so, something caught hold of it, and he began to pull. When he was near to drawing the rope up, he had quite the sight to behold: instead of his wife, he had pulled up something horned, tailed, and covered in blood!

– Who are you? – asked the peasant.

– I am the Devil himself! But I beseech thee as a brother born, since thou hast nearly pulled me out and saved me from torment, be not frightened of me, and do not cast me back down. In return, for the good thou hast done me, I shall give thee an herb that will allow thee to cure the possessed. There are many possessed souls, and thou shalt grow wealthy with ease!

Enticed by the promise of wealth, the peasant pulled the devil up and then made to lower the rope again for his wife.

– Nay, my good brother – the Devil begged him – do not pull her out, for once she lays eyes upon me, she will surely slay me! Alas, we were

but a devilish company, sitting round the fire to dine, when she fell upon us like thunder from the heavens! And she would not be still, but seized a burning log from the fire and laid into us! She slayed us all, and only I remain alive!

The Devil, being as devils are, persuaded the fellow to his will and went his way. The peasant left his wicked wife in the pit and returned to his abode. Thus, by healing the possessed, he soon gained widespread renown. And his wealth grew such that he bought himself a great estate.

One day, the emperor, too, was struck mad. Word of the skilled healer reached the royal court, and they sent a messenger to summon the peasant, bidding him to come to heal the emperor. Through the messenger, they warned him further that if the emperor were swiftly cured, he would be richly rewarded; but if he refused to come, the emperor's men would seize him and cast him into the dungeon. Without delay, the peasant set forth, and when he was halfway on his journey, he encountered his brother-in-devilry.

– Whither art thou bound? – inquired his fiendish kin.

– I'm on my way to heal the emperor.

– I tell thee, thou shalt not go there, for thou must not!

– And why is that?

– Because I have driven the emperor mad, and if thou proceedest, I shall drive thee mad as well!

Thus spoke the Devil and went his way.

The peasant sat by the roadside, pondering: "If I go to the emperor, the Devil shall drive me mad as well, and if I do not go, the emperor's men will cast me into the dungeon to end my days there!" At last, he resolved to proceed and heal the emperor. Upon arriving at the palace,

he was led to the door of the emperor's chamber, when he requested that he be brought chains. Once they were delivered, he approached and opened the small door, then rattled the chains and cried out with all his might:

– Flee, my brother, for I have pulled my wife from the pit!

When the Devil heard what his brother-in-devilry proclaimed, he was struck with fear and transformed into a foul wind, fleeing to the farthest reaches of the world. The peasant then healed the emperor with the herb, and the emperor rewarded him richly.

The Bird Girl

There once was a king who had but one son. When the time came for him to take a wife, the king sent him forth into the world to search for a maiden for himself. The king's son set out and, having wandered the whole world over, found no maiden to his liking. At long last, after many fruitless years and great sums squandered, he came to the bitter recognition that his quest was in vain. Disheartened, he resolved to end his life, for he could not fathom a life devoid of love. Pondering how best to accomplish this, he ascended a high hill, intending to hurl himself from its peak so that not even his bones would remain. When he reached the top of the hill, he climbed upon a great slab of stone that lay at the edge of the cliff, and just as he was about to cast himself down, he heard a voice speak to him:

– Nay, man, for the three hundred and sixty-five days that be in a year!

The young heir halted and, seeing no one, asked:

– Who is it that speaks to me? Show yourself, and when you have heard my woes, you shall not hinder me from ending mine own wretched life!

Thereupon appeared to him an old man, white as a sheep, and spoke thus:

– I know well the burden that plagues thee, but hear me: thou see the high mountain yonder? – and with that, he pointed with his finger.

– I see it, – said the young man.

– Well then, – said the old man. – Atop that mountain, there sits an old woman, her hair all of gold, and day and night, she remains in that same place, holding a bird upon the folds of her gown. Whosoever can fetch that bird shall be the happiest man in all the world!

– There is no happiness for me, old man, you speak in vain.

– And why shouldst thou not give it a try? Put aside, for a while, what thou hast intended, and heed my counsel.

– Very well then, tell me what I must do – the prince replied, though reluctantly.

– When you reach her, should strength be thy ally, you must seize the old woman by her golden hair before her gaze falls upon thee. Should her eyes meet yours first, ere you grasp her by that hair, you shalt be turned to stone on that very spot and in that very instant, just as it befell all the young men you shall see there – frozen on their knees, as though carved from the very marble!

– And what shall I do then? – the prince inquired of the old man, saying to himself: “It matters not to me; why should I not venture forth? If I can manage to seize her by that hair, perhaps good fortune shall follow. Yet if not, I had already resolved to yield up the ghost!”

– Then demand that she giveth thee the bird, and taking hold of it, kiss it! – with those words, the old man vanished.

The prince was taken aback by this and made his way toward the other hill. Yet, no path could be found there, for it was entirely overgrown with thorns. He drew his sword and began to clear his passage. As he approached the top, he spotted the old woman with her golden hair as she was sitting in a valley and holding the bird in her lap. Quietly, he crept up from behind, and by good fortune, she did not hear him, for

she was basking in the sun, playing with and tickling the bird. The prince leapt forward and seized the old woman by her hair. She let out a loud cry, causing the entire hill to tremble as if shaken by the earth's mighties quake, yet the king's son held on tight and would not let go.

Then the old woman said to him:

– What dost thou want from me, young man?

The prince replied:

– I demand that you give me the bird from your lap and restore all these Christian souls to life, or I shall take your head from your shoulders this very moment!

Yielding, she consented, handed him the bird, and then released a blue wind from her lips, which swept over the stone figures of those men. In an instant, they were all restored to life and began to rejoice in their newfound existence.

Not releasing the old woman's golden hair, the king's son seized the bird, which chirped so sweetly in his hand that he was enticed to kiss it. As he did, the bird transformed into the fairest maiden. She was a maiden unlike any other in the world for her beauty, who the old woman had bewitched and turned into a bird. This bird had chirped in the old woman's lap, its song echoing far and wide, enchanting young fellows to seek her out. When the king's son beheld the damsel and she him, a fierce love ignited in both their hearts. The old woman saw that she was defeated and said:

– Take her and may fortune favor thee, for thou possessest a brave heart! Thou hast bravely bested me and earned the fairest maiden in the world. Here, take this rod; should trouble befall thee, strike the stone with it.

And so the old woman with golden hair remained seated upon the hill, while the prince took the maiden by the hand, along with the rod, and set forth to his home. As they journeyed, they came upon the banks of a great and wild river, where no bridge spanned its waters, nor could it be forded. He touched the stone by the river with the rod, and at that moment, the water parted and ceased its flow, allowing the two to walk across the dry riverbed. Continuing onward, they stumbled upon a great pack of wolves, which surrounded them and lunged to tear them apart. The prince grasped the rod and swung it to strike those who charged, and each one the rod touched turned into an anthill. After enduring a few more trials, which they easily overcame, the two reached home safe and sound and were wed.

Prince Jovan

There once was a tsar who had a wicked and vile wife. She despised both the tsar and all the nobility. They had a son, Jovan, who had just come of age and mastered all the knightly skills. Wherever the tsar went, he would take his son with him. But the tsaritsa, always ill-tempered and angry with all, one day burst with fury at her husband for taking their son everywhere, so much that it finally wore on the tsar, and he said:

– Take as much treasure as you desire, and go whithersoever you will, only that mine eyes see thee no more!

When the tsaritsa beheld that her time in the court was drawing to a close, she grew anxious. Uncertain of her course, she began to implore her son to accompany her, saying:

– When I take my leave from the court, the tsar shall surely wed anew, and a stepmother is no true mother; she shall cast aspersions upon you before your father, who shall surely cherish her offspring more than you! She shall spare no effort to cast you from the court and mayhap even seek your demise should the opportunity arise, solely to ensure the kingdom for her own offspring. Therefore, since thy father hath discarded me, come with me! Let us gather as much treasure as we can carry and depart together, but let us do so unseen by the tsar!

Prince Jovan considered that it might indeed be so, and he heeded his mother's counsel. That evening, he stealthily prepared two horses: for himself, he took the steed known as Swan, upon which he had ever ridden, and for his mother, he chose the finest of the tsar's horses. Thus, the two stealthily departed the court in the dead of night.

When dawn broke, the tsar readied himself to go hunting in the highlands. He sent a servant to awaken his son so that they might prepare to depart together. The servant went to the chamber, but the prince was not there, nor was the tsaritsa in her quarters! He returned to the tsar and relayed the news, prompting the tsar to send him to ascertain whether the prince's Swan was still in the stable. The servant went, reporting upon his return that neither the Swan nor the prince could be found. The tsar then realized that his son had gone with his mother, and he grew troubled, immediately dispatching servants in all directions to search for them, requesting:

– If you find them, let the tsaritsa come back home; I shall do her no harm!

The servants hastened their search but found them nowhere.

The tsaritsa and her son wandered the world hither and thither, finding no place to rest. One day, they stumbled into a desolate wilderness where they saw no living soul for several days. The frost had tightened its grip, and they, chilled and weary from their long ride, spied smoke curling from a cave. Believing that perhaps someone was warming themselves by the fire, they decided to draw near and seek warmth as well. Upon reaching the entrance, they were struck by a terrifying sight: in the cave, around a great fire, sat a band of giants. The tsaritsa and her son turned their horses to flee, but the giants, ever watchful, immediately took notice of them, and the largest of the lot exclaimed:

– Behold, my brothers, a prize most easy has come to our door! Seize them so we might prepare them for our feast!

The giants seized their spears and charged forward, but Jovan, the young heir, seeing that they understood naught but brute force, drew his sword and urged the Swan among them, cutting them all down. Their leader alone managed to evade him, slipping into the cave and hiding himself in a crevice, while the prince and his mother entered and warmed themselves by the fire. They were famished, yet had nothing to eat, so Jovan said to his mother:

– Stay here and warm thyself, while I shall go and catch something!
– and thus he took his bow and quiver full of arrows, mounted the Swan, and rode up into the mountains. As he ventured deeper into the woods, he soon spotted and swiftly caught a quail, which he brought back to the cave. There, they roasted it and feasted, then decided to remain for the night. When morning came and they saw that the storm showed no signs of abating, they resolved to stay a while longer, and Jovan set off once more to hunt. As soon as he left, the tsaritsa found herself face to face with the lord of the giants, who greeted her with a good morning. She returned his greeting and regarded him from head to toe. Noticing that he was robust and strong, she felt no fear but rather found him appealing and said to him:

– Thou art indeed a true hero; come, let us court!

The giant was taken aback by her proposal and replied:

– I would gladly do so, but I must not offend thy companion!

The tsaritsa then revealed to the giant that the youth was her son and that he had gone into the mountains to hunt. The giant responded:

– If you would be my wife, would you betray thy son to me so that I might slay him, allowing thee to remain here so we might court forever? I am the lord of the giants; I possess all that the world has to offer!

The tsaritsa listened carefully to this enticing offer, and she promised she would betray her son. Then the giant instructed her:

– When thy son returns, engage him in a game and make a wager that the one who loses must bind the hands of the winner. If you should prevail, there lies a rope yonder; bind him well! Once you have done this, summon me so that I may slay him!

And she promised him that she would do as instructed. When Prince Jovan returned from the hunt, bringing two quails, which they roasted and feasted upon, the tsaritsa said:

– Son, we are here anxious and downcast. Let us play the game of rings; whoever prevails shall bind the hands of the other!

– Come, mother, let us play to lift our spirits!

Thus, they began to play the game of rings. The prince could have bested his mother, but he chose to please her and let her win. Then she took the rope and bound his hands from elbows to fingertips:

– Now, son, pull your arms to see if you are truly as strong as you claim!

Jovan laughed and pulled this way and that: the rope snapped into seven pieces!

– Blessed am I, for I have a strong son!

When in the morning, Jovan once again set off for the hunt, the giant visited the tsaritsa and she told him how easily her son had broken the rope. The giant then instructed her to feign illness and say to him: “Son, if only I could have an apple from the beech tree, I would recover with ease!”

– And tell him that you heard there is a lake atop that mountain, and beside that lake grows a beech tree that bears apples. But do not

mention that a three-headed serpent guards that tree and no one has ever returned who went to gather those apples!

Thus, having counselled her, the giant slipped away from the cave. Prince Jovan returned from the hunt carrying three quails and saying:

– Here, mother, ample fare!

– Blessed am I, my son, to have thee! Yet, I feel quite unwell; it seems I am on the verge of death! While I dozed, a man appeared in my dream and said: “If only thou hadst an apple from the beech tree, thou wouldst recover at once!” He also told me that at the summit of that mountain yonder lies a lake beside which grows a beech tree bearing apples and that these apples were created by God himself as a remedy!

The prince was filled with sorrow for his mother; tears welled up in his eyes, and he mounted his horse, setting off for the summit of that mountain. Upon reaching the top, he found a lake and a beech tree by its side, adorned with large, rosy apples that were so delightful they were hard to look away from. He tethered his horse beneath the tree and gathered a whole bag of the finest fruits. Just as he was about to leave, a three-headed serpent spotted him and lunged to seize him in its jaws. Upon seeing this, the prince threw his spear and struck the ugly serpent in the neck. He had aimed so well that half the spear plunged into the ground. Then he drew his sword, severed its heads, and impaled them on the spear before carrying them back to the cave. When he threw them down before his mother, she gasped in fright and said:

– What is that, my son?

– Here, mother, are the three heads of a giant serpent that sought to devour me beneath that beech tree!

– Blessed am I, my son, for I had no knowledge of the champion I bore!

The prince handed her an apple from the beech tree, and she ate it, declaring that she was healed. Then she embraced him, tenderly stroking him:

– Tell me, my son, since you are so strong, could you hold fast to any rope with thy hands bound?

– There is no rope I could not break, but I know not if I could withstand a bowstring!

– Well, here is a bowstring; let us see if you can!

– Come now, mother!

She took the bowstring and tightened it around her son's arms from elbows to fingertips. Jovan strained against the string but could not break free. He tensed his muscles, yet with every effort, blood oozed from his fingertips. Finally, he slumped and gasped, saying:

– I cannot, mother; I lack such strength!

– Pull again; you are nearly free!

– I cannot; release me!

When she saw that he could not break the bowstring, the tsaritsa cried out:

– Where art thou, lord of all giants?

The giant rushed in with his sword drawn, intent on striking down the prince, but the mother said:

– Do not slay him; instead, pluck out his eyes and place him upon his steed. Take him away and cast him into a pit!

The giant plucked out Jovan's eyes and placed him upon the Swan, then carried him away and cast him into a pit near the road. The horse was of no use to him, so he left it by the pit and went to the empress in

the cave. As if he were bound there, the Swan refused to leave the pit, tossing his head and pawing the ground. Some merchants happened upon the road and saw the horse standing there. One of them stopped to inspect if anyone was below. When he reached the edge of the pit, he heard a voice calling from within and summoned the others. The merchants approached, and one said:

– Bind me with a rope and lower me down so that I may see if anyone is below!

They untied the ropes from their packs and braided them together, binding the man around his waist before lowering him down. There, he found the young man, tied him well, and the others pulled the merchant and the prince up together. When they saw that the lad's eyes had been gouged out, they asked who he was, whence he came, and who had taken his eyes. He recounted everything: who he was, whose heir he was, and how it had all come to pass.

– And what shall we do with thee now?

– If there be a spring nearby, carry me and set me down there; you should take the horse and hold it as thine own!

The merchants placed him upon the horse and carried him to a spring, where they seated him beneath a willow. They wished to lead the horse away, but the Swan refused to budge an inch, so they abandoned the attempt and left him there. Thus, Prince Jovan spent the night by the spring.

Around midnight, the fairies came to the spring to drink and wash, and there they found the prince beneath the willow. As they approached him, they noticed that his eyes had been gouged out. Prince Jovan sensed someone near him and cried out:

– Who are you that I hear around me?

– We are forest fairies. We have come to drink of the water and to wash. But who art thou, and whence dost thou hail?

He recounted to them in detail who he was and where he came from, all the way to how he lost his eyes in the cavern. When the fairies understood, they took pity on him and began to converse among themselves:

– Could we perhaps craft him some eyes?

Jovan overheard their conversation and said to them: “Behold, my mother wrapped them in a kerchief and placed them in my pocket,” – and he took out the small bundle and offered it to them. The fairies placed the eyes into their sockets and filled them with their milk. By dawn, they were as healthy as they had been. Prince Jovan remained there the entire day, and before the evening fell, he set off for the cave where his mother and the giant lodged. Upon arriving, he cried out:

– Mother, where are you? Your son has come to visit!

Having heard his voice, those two were stricken with fear. The giant attempted to flee, but the prince did not allow it; he caught up with the giant and dealt him a fatal blow. Then he seized his mother, binding her hands and feet, and there they passed the night. At dawn, he mounted his horse. He placed his mother behind him, securing her around his waist, and set off for his fatherland.

When the merchants arrived in the realm of his father, they went to the tsar and recounted how they had found his son without eyes in a pit and how they had rescued him, sharing all that he had told them. The tsar did not believe them until they described the Swan and how he had refused to leave Jovan behind. Only then did the tsar become convinced of the truth and was so overwhelmed with sorrow that he nearly lost his mind.

On the first night, the tsar could not sleep from the grief until dawn, when a man approached him in a dream and said: "Awake, tsar, behold your son!" He sprang up, yet when he realised it had been a dream, he shed tears and sighed deeply. Still, he moved closer to the window and beheld a wondrous sight: Prince Jovan riding on the Swan, with his mother behind him! The tsar was overjoyed; he stepped out to meet his son, embraced and kissed him, then took him by the hand and led him into the palace, while his servants took the tsaritsa to another house. The tsar then commanded a celebration and proclaimed throughout the entire realm that his son had returned.

After Prince Jovan rested for a while, he sat with his father, who told him how he had spent woeful days without him and how he had not gone hunting since. He recounted everything right up to the moment when the merchants had brought the news. When Prince Jovan heard that his father knew everything, he could not gather his heart around betraying his mother, declaring instead that what the tsar had heard from the merchants was not true:

– Behold, I look upon you with healthier eyes. And how could a mother take her son's eyes; surely she would give her own first!

The tsar's expression darkened, and he immediately ordered that the merchants, who were still in his town, be brought forth.

– Why did you lie to me and offend me when you said you had found my son in a pit and that his mother had taken out his eyes, yet here he is, come back with his mother, healthy and joyful!?

They swore that what they had conveyed was verily true, but it availed them not.

– You deserve the gallows! Guards, take them to the dungeon!

And he commanded that gallows be constructed and that all those merchants be hanged by the morrow.

When Prince Jovan saw that his father was resolute in taking the lives of these men, he began to ponder: "It would truly be a grievous shame not to tell the truth and let the tsar hang the people who rescued me!" He went forth to the tsar and swore that these men were honest, that they had spoken nought but the truth, and then he recounted all that had transpired. When the tsar understood, he was displeased with his progeny for having concealed the truth. He brought the merchants to the court, welcomed them warmly, and gifted each one a load of treasure so that they left in joy. Then he inquired of his son:

– What shall you do with your wicked mother? What punishment will you bestow upon her for her misdeeds?

Prince Jovan could not contain himself and wept before his father because he still felt pity for his mother, even though she had wrought him great suffering, and he said:

– I cannot judge my mother; do with her as you deem just! – and he withdrew so as not to witness her fate.

The tsar ordered that the guards place the tsaritsa in a barrel and throw it down the cliff into the sea.

The Magical Flute and the King's Daughter

There once lived a wealthy man who had an only son, whom he named Dobraš³, for he was a child of a kind nature. When the boy had grown, his father sent him off to study, and he learned many crafts and sciences – far more than most. Afterwards, his father gave him a thousand ducats and bade him journey into the world. Thus, Dobraš travelled far and wide, and after two or three years had passed, he decided to return home. As he walked along a path across a great mountain, he met an old man. The man was hunchbacked, and his long white beard trailed upon the ground. When the old man saw Dobraš, he stopped and asked if he might spare a coin. Dobraš felt pity for him, but there was only one ducat left in his purse. As he pondered what to do, the old man fell to his knees and began to plead and call upon the Lord:

– Please, for heaven's sake, it will return to you in kindness!

Dobraš thought, “By evening, I shall be home in my father's house, and I can give him this last ducat.” So he handed over the final coin. The old man smiled and, in return, gave him a flute and a woven pouch, saying:

– Here, my son, take this as a gift. This flute may serve you well, for it is not like any other. But do not play it unless there is a dire need.

³ Dobraš comes from Montenegrin adjective “dobar”, meaning good and kind (t/n).

Dobraš took what the old man had offered him, and they parted ways. By evening, he had reached his home, where his father and mother greeted him with joy:

– Oh, our dear and beloved son, welcome home, our good fortune!

At supper, his mother and father asked him about all the places he had been and all that he had seen and experienced. Then, his father said:

– My son, you have gained knowledge, you have seen the world, but now it is time to do some work here at home!

– Gladly, I shall do whatever you ask of me! – Dobraš replied.

They decided that Dobraš should try his hand at the baker's trade. They gave him a large sum of money and a few helpers, and he began to knead and bake all kinds of bread – hardtack, rye, white, and black. The people came in droves, and he sold as much as he could, but he also gave some freely to those who had no means to pay. The bread kept going, but the money grew ever scarcer, and before long, he had ruined the bakery.

– This will not do, – said his father and mother, – choose another trade.

– Very well, I shall make all manner of footwear! – he replied.

So, his parents gave him more ducats and provided helpers. Dobraš opened a shop, crafting all kinds of shoes – boots, slippers, and sandals. Again, the people came in crowds, and once more, he gave gladly for both money and nothing, for he could not bear to see the poor go barefoot. Thus, before long, he ruined this business as well. When his father and mother saw that this trade, too, was failing, they said:

– My son, this too will not do. Think of what else you might try.

– Very well, – he said and decided to rent an inn and supply it with all that travellers might need to eat and rest. For the third time, his parents gave him plenty of money. His father found the finest cook and servants for him, and Dobraš began his work. Word quickly spread that there was an inn where delicious meals were served, and the business prospered as best it could. But once again, it was all in vain: he gave away everything without charge, as readily as for payment, and for the third time, he ruined the business in no time.

Then his father and mother began to talk among themselves: “Perhaps this was to no avail that we sent him to great schools. He has learned trades and travelled the world, but it is of no use. If we give him all that we have, he will turn us into beggars!” Then the father said to his wife: “Tomorrow, you will call him before you and tell him this: ‘My son, we sent you to study, and you have learned many crafts. We sent you out into the world to see and learn even more from others, yet you have ruined one business after another in no time! If you cannot do better, then leave us and do not return until you have come to your senses!’”

When his mother called Dobraš before her on the following day, she told him everything as agreed. Dobraš pondered and said:

– Oh, dear mother, I cannot change my ways; I shall act as I believe is right. Forgive me the harm I have caused you, but I shall venture into the world once more and see what fortune may bring!

His mother forgave him and gave him one hundred ducats:

– Go, my son, and seek your fortune; you shall find it more easily if you pursue it on your own!

His father did likewise, and when his son replied in the same manner, he handed him five hundred ducats:

– My son, may your path be simple and your journey fortunate!

Dobraš took with him the flute and pouch that the hunchbacked old man had given him, and he set out into the world. After travelling for two or three months, he spent all the money his father and mother had given him. In his distress, being now a hundred inns away from home, he remembered what the old man had said about the flute – to play it when he found himself in dire need. So, he sat in the shade of a gnarled oak by the roadside and played the flute. As soon as he did, as far as the music could be heard, all living things began to dance and sing. The beasts started to leap, the trees waved their branches and rustled, even though there was no wind, and the travellers who happened by began to dance and sing, marvelling at the unknown force that compelled them to do so. Gradually, a great crowd gathered around the musician, dancing and singing. When the music ceased, the enchanted people began to approach him, offering him coins – some a grosz,⁴ some three, some five. Thus, as he continued on his journey, he earned money with the flute, gathering so many coins that he could not count them. Tired of carrying the sacks of money, he decided to buy a large piece of land by the seaside, a place blessed by nature's beauty, and there he had a manor built for himself.

After he had built the manor, as splendid as any palace an emperor might envy, he stayed there for some time until he realised that the manor alone does not bring happiness to a man if there are no people in it. Then he slung the pouch with the flute and the remaining money over his shoulder and continued on his way. For days he walked aimlessly, and at last, weary and hungry, he entered a city and sought an inn to refresh himself and spend the night. When he sat at the table, the innkeeper brought him dinner, and he began to eat, but lo and behold, the food was completely without salt! When he asked for salt, the innkeeper replied:

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⁴ A small silver coin (t/n).

– Traveller from distant lands, I do not know what you mean by “salt.” We have none of that here.

– How can you have none? Salt is a seasoning that is added to food.

– In our kingdom, no one has ever heard of such a seasoning.

– You have never heard of salt, and your city lies by the salty sea?

– If this does not suit you, then go and eat somewhere else, where they have salt!

Having eaten his unsalted dinner, Dobraš could not sleep that night, pondering in wonder at how people could live without salt. Before dawn, he came up with the idea of searching for a salt mine and bringing salt to this city. So, he bought a ship in the harbour and set out into the open sea.

As he sailed across the vast waters searching for salt mines, he came upon a deserted island and noticed two men wrestling there. He landed on the shore unnoticed and moved closer to see and hear them better. The young men, driven by their fervor, were bloodied and foaming at the mouth, while a girl stood beside them, trembling with fear. Suddenly, she spotted him and began waving her handkerchief and shouting at him:

– Oh, dear brother, save me!

Dobraš approached to try to separate the young men, but when they spotted him, they charged at him. He drew a small pistol and frightened them:

– Run, lest my eyes see you; otherwise, I shall kill ye both!

They turned and fled in a frenzy until they disappeared behind the hills. At that moment, the girl ran toward him and threw her arms around his neck:

– My saviour!

The two of them sat down to speak, and she recounted to him how thirty pirates had kidnapped and imprisoned her. She explained how a storm had wrecked their ship on this deserted island and shattered it against the rocks, and how, with no escape in sight, they resorted to eating one another out of great hunger until only these two remained, wrestling over who would eat whom.

– The one who was left would surely have eaten me! – she cried out, terrified.

The girl would not tell him whose daughter she was or from which land she came, but out of gratitude, she removed a ring from her finger and gifted it to him. Dobraš took her on his boat, and when they happily reached his estate, he opened the doors of his manor and said:

– Here, dear sister, all of this is yours and mine. I have no one now but God and you, so you stay here while I go to finish what I had planned. If death finds me on the way, let all of this be yours!

And so he set out to sea once more, travelling day and night, day and night, until he found a rich salt mine and loaded his ship to the brim before sailing to the land where they had never heard of salt. When he finally arrived, he docked in the harbour, tied up his ship, and entered the city. Then he took out the flute and began to play. Hearing the sounds from the flute, all the people around him began to dance and sing. The news of this wondrous festivity reached the king, and he ordered that the musician be brought to the palace. When Dobraš approached the king and bowed before him, the king asked where he was from and how he possessed the power to make everyone dance and sing whenever he played the flute.

– God has gifted me! – he replied, unwilling to reveal anything.

– Give that flute to my servant; let him try playing it! – the king commanded.

Dobraš handed the flute to the king's servant, who blew into it attempting to play, but not a sound could be heard.

– Well, – said the king, – I see that God has blessed you. Tonight, you shall entertain the guests in my palace. I will give you treasures as much as you desire!

When that evening Dobraš went to the palace, the king commanded:

– First, we shall dine, and after dinner, we will entertain the guests with music!

Various dishes were displayed on the board, but all were unsalted. Then, from his pouch, Dobraš retrieved the small sack of salt he had brought with him, stood up, and began to sprinkle the dishes one by one. As he did this, the guests looked at him in astonishment, and the king shouted to the guards to stop him. The guards seized Dobraš and threw him down to his knees before the king.

– What are you doing, you miserable man?! I brought you here for a feast, and you would poison us!

– No, Your Majesty, far from it! I merely salted the dishes to make them tastier.

– What have you done?

– I have added a spice called salt.

The king pondered for a moment and commanded a servant to taste the salted dish. The servant approached with trepidation and, trembling, took a bite. He chewed and chewed while all watched him intently. Clearly satisfied, he reached for another bite, and when it became evident that there was no poison, the king asked the servant:

– Is it tasty?

– Indeed, Your Highness, it is very delicious!

The king could no longer resist and took a taste, as did all his guests. The surprise was universal, and they all rushed to eat. After satisfying his hunger, the king contentedly patted his full belly and asked Dobraš if he could procure that seasoning to share with all his subjects. Dobraš eagerly replied that he had a ship full of salt in the harbour. The king rejoiced and summoned his chief adviser to announce this discovery and instruct the people to season their food with salt from that day forth. Then, he called upon Dobraš to play the melody on his pipe, that all may rejoice. In the morning, the king bestowed upon him a ship full of gold and instructed him to return with another ship of salt in six months.

When Dobraš returned to his manor, he was joyfully met by his sister, to whom he said:

– Behold, dear sister, now we possess great wealth. I sold the ship of salt and received in exchange a ship of gold from a kingdom where they knew not of salt. In half a year, I shall sail thither again to bring more salt.

On the first evening, while they sat upon the terrace gazing at the waves, he noticed a tear in his sister's eye and inquired:

– Why do you weep, sister?

– Ah, dear brother, sorrow befalls me, for I have not seen my home and my father and mother for long, and I know not if they still live. Should I seek my homeland, I am so lost that I know not whither to turn first. If you cannot aid me in returning home, then I pray thee, procure some gold and silk thread that I may weave a kerchief fit to lay upon thy lap!

At a merchant's, Dobraš obtained the golden thread and silk that she required. As she wove the kerchief, she inscribed upon it, little by little, the tale of her life: how, as a princess in her father and mother's court, she spent her days in happiness, how she was abducted from the royal garden by pirates, and all that transpired until she found herself upon the desolate isle, from whence the young knight rescued her, where she now dwells as his beloved sister. When, after half a year, she completed the embroidery – just as Dobraš prepared to embark – she folded the kerchief into a box and presented it to her friend, whom she loved as a brother. Dobraš placed the box in his pocket. When the time for departure drew near, they bid each other farewell, and he set sail to fill his ship with salt from the salt mine and to carry it back to that same kingdom.

Dobraš travelled day and night, day and night, until he reached the kingdom's harbour. He moored his ship there and entered the city to lodge at an inn. As he wandered through the streets, he came upon a square where a man lay dead on the pavement. Passersby moved past him, not casting a glance his way. He inquired of one passerby why the dead man lay in the midst of the square, unnoticed by all. The man informed him of the deceased's identity, explaining that he had owed a considerable sum to the citizens. It was customary among them that when such a debtor passed away, none might approach the spot where he met his end, let alone bury him, until someone settled his debts. Upon hearing this, Dobraš commanded the town crier to proclaim throughout the city: "Whoever is owed money by this man, let them come today to such and such inn, where his debts shall be settled." Soon enough, creditors gathered around the inn, and Dobraš dispensed one ducat to some, five to others, ten to some more, and fifty or more to others, thus settling all the debts of that unfortunate soul. Moreover, he granted a hundred ducats for his burial and ordered the people:

– Carry him to the cemetery and bury him as befits any Christian!

The entire city marvelled, as did the king himself, who soon learned of this matter. Wondering who might be this man who had paid such a considerable sum for the deceased debtor, he commanded that the fellow be brought before him. When they presented him, the king inquired:

– Are you the one who has settled the debts of that deceased debtor who lay in the square?

– Indeed, I am. Do you not recognise me, Your Majesty? I am the very one who brought thee a shipload of salt last year. Here I stand again, for I have brought another load, which is in the harbour as we promised.

Then Dobraš took up his pipe to play a tune, hoping to convince the king. Upon hearing this, the king recognised him and embraced him, praising the salt which the people had readily grown accustomed to as to any good thing. He invited him to the palace for a repast. As they sat at the board with the king and the nobles, Dobraš was reminded of the silk kerchief that his sister had embroidered with golden thread. He withdrew the box from his pocket, opened it, and spread the kerchief across his lap. The golden embroidery unfurled in its radiant brightness. The king's vizier, who sat beside Dobraš, began to read curiously all that was woven into the fabric. When he had read it all, he understood, and taking the kerchief from Dobraš's lap, he lifted it high and called out to the king:

– Good tidings, my lord! Your daughter lives! Behold, here she is, and here is the tale of her life upon this kerchief embroidered with gold!

In disbelief, the king took the kerchief and began to examine it himself. As he read, excitement grew within him, and he exclaimed:

– My only daughter, she lives! How did this kerchief come to be in thy possession?

Dobraš then recounted all that had transpired, how he had rescued the unfortunate maiden from the desolate island and welcomed her into his manor as a sister, explaining that he had left her there when he set forth on this journey. The king wept for joy and said:

– Dear son, this news is dearer to me than life itself! I have but her alone. If you can bring her to me, I shall give her to you as your bride!

Then the king commanded that the people rejoice and that cannons be fired from the ramparts. Dobraš took up his pipe and all that breathed began to dance and sing. This was heard by the chancellor, who had long harboured intentions of seizing the royal crown by taking the king's daughter as his wife, and envy ignited within him. Being of a wicked disposition, he resolved to slander the future son-in-law to the king, claiming that he would never return once he departed, and that neither he nor his daughter would ever be seen again. Thus, he whispered into the king's ear:

– If you do believe that your daughter shall safely return home, send me with him to keep an eye on everything!

The king believed this and prepared a ship laden with gold in exchange for a ship of salt, sending his chancellor with Dobraš. They set forth upon the open sea and sailed day and night, day and night, until they arrived at the shore where Dobraš's manor stood. When his sister beheld him, she spread her arms and embraced him, saying:

– Welcome, dear brother!

– I am more blessed to find thee, dearest sister! Here is gold for salt, and I bring thee joyful news: that king who gave me gold for salt is thy father!

She rejoiced greatly at this news, and tears of joy streamed down her face:

– Dearest brother, you have found my father and my homeland!

– It was not I who did this, but the kerchief you did embroider. The king has commanded that I return you to your home, so prepare yourself to close our halls, that we may depart! Behold, here is the king's chancellor, whom he sent to accompany us.

And soon, the ship set sail once more. The king's chancellor, whom the princess recognised at once, feigned friendship before Dobraš and spoke with him on the deck, all the while watching for a chance to take his life. As they travelled thus, approaching the kingdom, Dobraš grew drowsy and fell asleep. Then, while Dobraš slumbered, the chancellor seized him and cast him into the sea. When the princess beheld this, she screamed, but the chancellor threatened her that ill would befall her if she made a sound. Upon reaching the harbour, the king and his retinue awaited them, and as soon as the princess set foot on the ground from the ship, he embraced his daughter. Then he inquired of the whereabouts of his future son-in-law, who had brought him such joy. The chancellor replied:

– Did I not tell you, Your Majesty, that you would never see your daughter again had you not sent me to travel with him?

The princess heard this but dared not speak to her father, fearing the treachery of the chancellor. The king, filled with joy, embraced his daughter once more and commanded that, throughout the entire kingdom, there be merriment, that cannon be fired, and that all may come freely for three days to feast in his hall. He further resolved to wed his daughter to the very chancellor on the fourth day.

Yet, when cast into the sea, Dobraš was fortunate to fall into shallow waters, upon the sea grass, thus avoiding drowning. In the morn, with

the rising of the sun, an eagle descended from the clouds, grasped him with its talons, and bore him from the sea to the shore, saying:

– Dost thou know who I am?

– Are you not the eagle who speaks in the tongue of men?

– I am he who lay dead upon the city square, but God hath transformed me into an eagle. When I could not repay the multitude in life, now I repay thee, for thou hast settled my debts and ensured I was buried with honour. I have delivered thee from the sea; now go forth!

The eagle soared aloft and vanished into the clouds, while Dobraš, astonished by this wonder, made his way to the royal city. Upon his arrival, he found a great revelry afoot and learned that on the fourth day the king's daughter was to be wed to that very unfaithful official. He then devised a plan: he stealthily made his way to the imperial kitchen where dishes for the royal banquet were being prepared, and concealed beneath the table, he began to listen to the words of the cooks. One among them declared that a golden bowl of broth was prepared for the princess, whereupon he removed from his hand the ring that she had bestowed upon him and slyly dropped it into the broth.

When the king's daughter partook of the broth, she discovered at the bottom of the bowl the ring bearing her seal, adorned with three stars – the very ring she had given to her god-given brother when he had rescued her from certain death. She marvelled and rejoiced, for it was a sign that he yet lived and was near. Disturbed, she espied him among the king's guests, for he, too, had cast his gaze upon her. When Dobraš perceived that she had recognised him, he rose from the king's table and spoke:

– Your Majesty, may I approach to recount the trials I have endured?

The king granted him leave, and Dobraš approached, bowing low. He bore with him a flute and a satchel, yet none recognised him, for his

visage had been tarnished by the salt of the sea. As soon as he began to speak, the king discerned his identity, yet uttered not a word, choosing instead to continue listening. Dobraš brought his tale to a close and turned his gaze towards the king's chancellor:

– And this very chancellor, when I drowsed, cast me into the sea from the ship as we were journeying hither! – he exclaimed, gesturing toward the chancellor. – Behold, here is the golden ring from the princess, which she bestowed upon me when I rescued her. On it lies her seal, marked by three stars.

Upon hearing all this, the king forthwith commanded that the chancellor be cast into the dungeon and that the revelry endure for three more days, after which the princess and her saviour would be wed. Dobraš, filled with joy, consented to become the royal son-in-law and once more took up his flute, making the merriment even more jubilant. When the wedding festivities drew to a close, he took his bride by the hand, and together, they boarded a ship laden with gold, setting sail across the sea to surprise his parents in his homeland.



MONTENEGRIN FOLK FABLES



Wretched Am I – Through Myself Alone!

The woods called out to the forest:

- Lo, men have entered and are cutting us down!
- What kind of handles do they bear?
- Iron ones!
- Then they can do us no harm!

Again the woods cried to the forest:

- Lo, men have entered and are cutting us down!
- What kind of handles do they bear?
- Alas, they've fashioned them from our very own!
- Wretched am I, through myself alone!

The Wild Billy Goat

An old man had a wife, two young maidens, and a billy goat. One day, he said to one of the girls:

– Come now, child, go and mind the goat!

So the maiden went to tend the goat. In the evening, the old man took hold of the goat's belly and asked:

– Billy, Billy, are you full?

– How should I be full, Grandfather? – answered the goat. – That girl of yours spent the whole day in the woods with them shepherd lads, and all day I burrowed for roots beneath the fir's green shadow!

The old man grew angry and drove the girl away.

The next morning, he sent his other maiden to tend the goat. In the evening, he took hold of the goat's belly and asked:

– Billy, Billy, are you full?

– How should I be full, Grandfather? That child of yours sat upon a stone and kept weeping for her sister gone, while I spent the whole day long burrowing for roots beneath the fir's green shadow!

The old man drove the other girl away as well.

On the following morning, he sent his wife to tend the goat. In the evening, when she brought the goat home, the old man took hold of its belly and asked:

– Billy, Billy, are you full?

– Grandfather, how should I be full? That wife of yours sat upon a stone and kept weeping for her daughters gone, and all day long I burrowed for roots beneath the fir's green shadow!

The old man reached for the fire poker to strike the old woman, but when she saw it, she stripped off her black dress and fled.

Left alone, on the following day, the old man went to tend the goat himself. When he came home that evening, he felt the goat's belly once more and asked:

– Billy, Billy, are you full?

– How should I be full, Grandfather? You spent the whole day scratching them trousers of yours, and all day I burrowed for roots beneath the fir's green shadow!

The old man flew into a rage, seized the goat by the horns, skinned him alive, and drove him away.

Poor goat, not knowing where to go nor what to do, wandered off to the mill and shut himself inside.

Now a fox came to the mill to grind her grain, but when she could not get inside, she cried out:

– Open the door, whoever you are!

– I am the billy goat, fierce and wild! My horns are sharp as fairy-spears, and I'll rip you like a chick!

The fox was terrified and took to her heels. As she fled, she ran into the wolf.

– What's frightened you so, Fox, that you tremble like that? – asked the wolf.

– I went to the mill, and something inside it shouted: “I am the billy goat, fierce and wild! My horns are sharp as fairy-spears, and I’ll rip you like a chick!” When I heard that, I ran for my life!

– Well, now I shall go and see what sort of thing it is that speaks from the mill.

So the wolf came to the door and called out:

– Who goes there?!

The goat replied:

– It is I, the billy goat, fierce and wild! My horns are sharp as fairy-spears, and I’ll rip you like a chick!

The wolf grew frightened and fled. As he ran, he met the bear.

– Where’ve you been, Wolf, to be so out of breath?

– I went to the mill, and something inside it shouted: “I am the billy goat, fierce and wild! My horns are sharp as fairy-spears, and I’ll rip you like a chick!” I was so frightened, I ran away!

– What’s this? You, afraid? I’ll go and see for myself who it is that speaks from the mill.

But when the bear heard the goat’s shout, he too took fright and fled.

As he went on, he met a bee.

– Where are you bound, little Bee?

– I was just heading to the mill.

– Don’t go there – you’ll be done for! Something in the mill is shouting: “I am the billy goat, fierce and wild! My horns are sharp as fairy-spears, and I’ll rip you like a chick!”

But the bee paid no heed to the bear, and when she came near the mill and heard the goat, she too was stricken with fear and flew off.

As she flew, she met some wasps.

– What’s got you so shaken, Bee?

– Over at the mill, something’s crying out: “I am the billy goat, fierce and wild! My horns are sharp as fairy-spears, and I’ll rip you like a chick!”

The wasps were astonished.

– Let’s go and see who it is that’s shouting from the mill.

When they flew in and heard the same reply from the skinned goat, they were not afraid at all. They slipped in through the cracks between the planks and stung the poor goat so sorely that he dropped dead on the spot – and so they opened the mill.

How the Fox Took to Flying

A fox was walking through the woods with a cat. She met a pig, who asked:

– Where are you off to, foxy? – and struck her behind the neck with his hoof.

– Now, now, don't you lay a trot on me, piggy! I'll tell my cat, the hero, and he'll be the end of you!

And the cat twirled and purred and danced around the fox.

The pig grew scared and hid in a ditch.

The fox went on. Soon she met a wolf, who asked:

– Where are you off to, foxy? – and struck her behind the neck with his paw.

– Easy now, cousin wolf! I'll tell my cat, the hero, and he'll snap your neck in two!

And the cat danced, purred, and darted around the fox.

The wolf took fright and hid behind a beech tree.

Next came the bear. He too struck the fox behind the neck with his heavy paw.

– Don't you hit me, uncle bear, or I'll tell my cat, the hero, and he'll break your neck like a twig!

The cat danced and purred around the fox, leaping about.

The bear got frightened too and climbed up into the beech tree.

So they all stayed hidden, watching what the cat would do.

But the pig had left an ear sticking out. A fly landed on it and tickled him. The pig twitched his ear.

The cat spotted it, thought it was a mouse, and pounced – biting the pig's ear.

The pig squealed.

The cat, startled by the squeal, bolted behind the beech tree.

There he ran straight into the wolf, who jumped out in fear.

Then the cat, now scared of the wolf, leapt up into the beech tree.

And the bear, thinking the cat meant to kill him, tumbled down the tree in a panic – and broke his back.

The fox happily danced around the fallen bear, ready for a fine meal.

But just then a flock of crows swooped down, cawing:

– Let us eat our fill too, foxy, and then we'll carry you on our wings up to the heavens!

The fox was delighted at the thought of flying and let the crows feast.

Once they'd had their fill of meat, the crows lifted the fox onto their backs and flew off.

They flew and flew, until they asked:

– What do you see down below, foxy?

– I see a snake, and around the snake a thorn bush!

– Is that enough? Shall we let you go now?

– Go ahead, by all means! – said the fox.

And when they let go, the fox waved her paws, thinking she could go on flying – but she had forgotten she was not a bird and had no wings.

Below her lay a threshing floor, and in the middle of it stood a tall wooden post.

As she fell, her head spun and it seemed to her that the post was a priest in his tall black cap.

So she cried out:

– Clear off, holy man! That fine hat won't save you!

And so the fox came crashing down, and smashed to bits.

The Donkey, the Dog, the Cat, and the Cock

There was once a man who had a donkey. While the donkey was young, the man would load him down and ride him wherever he pleased. But when the donkey grew old, the master said:

– My poor donkey has grown feeble, all bent and worn. Best I kill him, he's no good for anything now!

The donkey heard this and, at the first chance, fled from his master.

He walked along the road until he came upon an old dog lying by the wayside.

– What's the matter with you, poor fellow? – asked the donkey.

– When I was young, – said the dog, – I barked and guarded the house well. But now I am old, and my master said he'd kill me, so I ran away.

– Come along with me! – said the donkey, and they joined company.

On their way, they came upon an old cat curled up in sorrow.

– What's got you so downcast, tomcat? – asked the donkey.

The cat lifted his head, and when he saw the pair, he said:

– Ah, when I was young, I hunted mice day and night. But now that I'm old, my master said I was useless and meant to kill me, so I escaped!

– Come with us, – said the donkey and the dog, and the cat joined their little band.

They walked on until they came upon a cock standing atop a stump by the roadside.

– What are you doing out here, poor rooster? – they asked.

– When I was young, – the cock replied, – I crowed every morning. But now I've grown old, and my master said to his wife, "Slaughter the cock, friends are coming tonight!" And when I heard that, I flew the coop!

– Come along with us!

– I will, by heaven! – said the cock, and so they went on together.

They walked and wandered until their path led them into a forest. Tired, they looked about to find where each might rest. The cock said:

– I shall perch in the fir tree!

The cat said:

– I'll curl up beneath the thorn-brake!

And the donkey and dog said:

– We'll lie beneath the thorn-brake too!

And so they lay down, though it was not to their liking – they were used to finer spots at their masters' homes. At some point, the cock from his perch in the fir tree saw a flicker of light in the distance. He called down to the others, and they all rose to see what it was. When they came near, they found a house, and inside sat men drinking raki¹.

– Let us drive them out and take the house for ourselves, – said the dog, and he devised the plan:

– You, donkey, rear up and place your front legs on the window. I'll climb onto you, the cat will climb onto me, and the cock shall perch

¹ *Raki* (*rakija* in Montenegrin), is a strong brandy popular throughout the Balkans, traditionally homemade and distilled from plums, grapes, or other local fruits (t/n).

atop the cat. Then you'll bray, I'll bark, the cat will yowl, and the cock will crow. That should scare them good and proper!

The donkey reared up to the window, the dog climbed onto him, the cat leapt atop the dog, and the cock stood proud on the cat's back. The donkey brayed, the dog barked, the cat shrieked, and the cock crowed.

The men were so frightened they fled without even a backward glance, and the animals entered the house and supped well. Afterwards, they each found a place to sleep and put out the light.

But those who had been driven out gathered nearby and decided someone must go back and see what manner of beast had roared so fiercely to make them run like hares.

– Which of us is brave enough?

At first there was naught but silence, until at last one dared to speak, so they would not all be branded cowards:

– Here, I'll go!

– Go on then, brave soul, and see what it is that frightens us so, that here in the forest we shiver and are chilled, and let us return home.

So the man crept back and entered the house on tiptoe. In the darkness, he saw something gleaming on the hearth. He waved his stick toward it – and the cat, lying there, slashed his nose with her claws.

The man shrieked and made for the door – but the dog leapt from behind it and sank his teeth into the man's leg. The man tore free and ran outside, but the donkey gave him a mighty kick in the back. Staggering in terror, the man fled, while the cock from above cried out: "Gi, gi, gi, gu!" The man, barely alive, gasping for his breath, stumbled back to the others.

– What was in there? – they asked.

After regaining some composure, he replied:

– I went inside, and it looked as though they were lifting the board and putting out the light. Something was glowing on the hearth. I touched it with my stick – and some devil leapt at me to take my nose clean off! I ran for the door, when something seized me by the leg. I broke free and made it outside – only for some demon to strike me in the back so hard I thought my spine was broken! Then, as I fled, I heard a voice cry: “Hold him, hold him!” And here I am, barely escaped with my life!

The Wolf's Scales

The wolf had been troubling a village, slaughtering far too much livestock. The villagers soon got tired of his raids and called the wolf to a gathering to strike some kind of deal. When the wolf came, they offered to cut off for him as much meat as he needed each day and leave it out, so long as he promised to do no further harm. The wolf agreed and gave his word: he would eat no more than a pound and a half of their meat daily, and in return, the villagers vowed that none among them would chase him off.

The very next morning, the wolf went and killed a villager's mare and her colt. The people summoned him again, and the wolf came.

– Why have you done more harm than what we agreed upon? – they demanded.

– I haven't, – said the wolf.

– What do you mean, you haven't? – the villagers cried.

– I killed the mare, weighed her on my own scales – she gave one full pound. Then I killed the colt, weighed him too – half a pound. I ate a pound and a half, just as you said.

The villagers grew angry, tore up their pact with the wolf, and from that day forward it was set: whatever the wolf could catch, he could eat, and no measure would bind him. But if they ever caught him, he'd be paying for it with his own hide.

The Wolf Who Wanted to Be a Reeve

A wolf came down into the lowlands, hoping to snatch some beast to eat, when he caught sight of a donkey. The donkey, seeing the wolf, had nowhere to run, so he stepped forward and spoke soft-like:

– Well, thank the Lord I ran into you! I was just heading into the woods to fetch you!

– Fetch me? Whatever for? – asked the wolf.

– What d'you mean, whatever for? – said the donkey. – Our reeve died, and the whole village met and agreed – you're to be our new reeve. They sent me to bring you. But since you're already here, no need for me to go lookin'. Climb on my back and let's go – folks are waitin'!

The wolf straightened up, mighty proud of himself, and took to the idea right away. He climbed up on the donkey, who carried him off toward the village. But just as they were nearing the first cottages, a man spotted them. Seeing a wolf riding a donkey, he reckoned the beast meant to kill it, so he raised his musket and fired.

By dumb luck, the wolf leapt off in time and tore off back to the woods, still in one piece. After a good run, he stopped under a beech tree to catch his breath. And after he'd had a moment to think, he gave a snort and said:

– Now ain't I the biggest fool that ever lived – lettin' a donkey make a fool of me! What was I thinkin', believin' such a tale, when I know plain well my father, and my grandfather, and his father before him were never reeves!

The Man and the Earth

There was once a man who long desired to buy a piece of land that lay in a fair place beside his garden. A chance befell, and he bought it. Out of sheer joy, he lay upon the earth, and, embracing it, said:

– O, happy am I, dear earth, that the time has come when thou art mine and I am thine, for I have long yearned for thee!

But the earth spoke and said:

– O, wretched man, do not be foolish! I have had ninety-nine masters before thee, all bearing thy name – and how many more were there whose names were not thine! To-day I am thine; to-morrow I shall belong to another. Thou, like all the rest, shalt vanish – and I shall remain the same.

The man was so afraid to hear the earth speak. But then he gave it thought and saw that all was as it had said. And from that day forth, he rejoiced no more, nor did he seek to buy land again.

The Hedgehog at the Fox's Lodge

Winter came and it grew cold, and all the beasts had gone to hide, but the hedgehog remained to freeze. Seeking shelter, he came upon the fox's den and, flattering her, said:

– Good fox, everyone says thou hast never harmed anyone! Misfortune hath brought me to thy doorstep, so grant me lodging this night, and on the morrow I shall repay thee. Let me stay but one night with thee, and I'll return thy kindness with kindness!

– I would be glad to do so, – answered the cunning fox, – but see for thyself how cramped I am; there is scarce room enough even for me!

– Just a little, dear fox, but a very little, that I might rest my head!

At an ill hour, the fox drew herself up as best she could and made a little space for the hedgehog. Now the hedgehog grew crafty and began to spread. The fox could not endure it, for his bristles pricked her sorely, and she shrank up more and more. At last the hedgehog spread wide, and the fox, vexed beyond measure, leapt from her den and fled away to the woods!

Out of Stubbornness, the Barrel Split

The bottom, the staves, the bung, and the hoops all set themselves in defiance.

The bottom said:

– We hold the drink, and if not for us, the devil himself would have taken it all!

The staves said:

– No, ‘tis we!

And the hoops said:

– Nay, indeed, ‘tis us!

The bung said:

– I hold the drink!

Then spoke the bandhoop:

– And what of me? Does no one speak of me!?

To this, the bung, staves, bottom, and hoops all shouted in one voice:

– Hush you, bandhoop, none cares for thee, no hope lies in thee!

The taut bandhoop slackened, the hoops loosened, the staves spread apart, and the drink spilt forth.

The Cat and the Hadžiluk

An old cat, who in his day had been a great hunter of mice, grew old and became slow. Seeing that he would soon perish from hunger, one morning he called all the mice together and said to them:

– Listen, my neighbours! Things have been as they have been so far, but now I am setting out on hadžiluk² and wish to live in peace of mind, so I would gladly have us make peace and that you fear me no longer!

The young mice gladly agreed, but one old, wary mouse said:

– Where do you think you're going, you crazy beasts? The one who once set out on hadžiluk tore off my tail, so I can never trust this one – even if I were to see a turban on his head, I'll stay close to my hole!

Some of the young mice who did not heed the old one ventured out, and the cat caught them.

² *Hadžiluk* (Turkish *haccılık*) originally refers to the Muslim pilgrimage to Mecca (*hajj*).

In Balkan folk tales and language, it often refers to embarking on a long journey or pilgrimage, and is sometimes used figuratively to describe retiring or seeking peace (t/n).

The Greedy Wolf and the Unfaithful Fox

Once upon a time, a fox espied a calf that had fallen into a deep pit, and she went forth to seek the wolf. She found him lying hungry within his lair and spake unto him:

– Lo, wolf, I have found meat! Come thou with me, that we may sup together this eve.

The wolf rejoiced at her words, and together they made their way unto the pit.

– How shall we descend? 'Tis deep, – quoth the wolf.

– Nay, 'tis not deep, forsooth! Behold! – quoth the fox, and withal she leapt into the pit.

Then likewise the wolf leapt down, and they began to eat. The fox did but nibble lightly, whilst the wolf filled himself full till he was swollen all about. Then he crouched, licking his lips, and gazed upward toward the pit's mouth:

– How shall we now escape, fair fox?

– Whosoever knoweth how to enter, knoweth how to depart, – said the fox and forthwith she leapt lightly from the pit.

– But the wolf, having tried many a time, found himself unable to rise, and he cried aloud:

– Alas, woe is me, dear fox!

To which she laughed and answered:

– Thy woe cometh not now, but shall surely befall thee when the master of the calf doth come!

And when the masters of the calf come, they'll slay the wolf outright.

The Lamb and the Wolves

Once upon a time, a lamb espied two wolves locked in fierce combat, and moved with pity, he drew near. With gentle and kindly words, he sought to calm their strife. And verily, what he desired came to pass; for the wolves, scenting one another anew, did make peace and agreed to share the lamb between them!

The Fox and the Irons

A young fox, whom her mother oft did warn to beware the irons,
for she had seen two foxes caught in such traps with broken heads,
came upon such irons bedecked with a tempting bait.

– I ken you well, – quoth she with a laugh, – yet shall ye not have my
head. I shall make my escape as did my mother afore me!

But then a thought did strike her: “What if I might find some cunning
means to snatch this fair bait without demise? Oh, how glad I would
be if I were but craftier than my mother! Swift shall I pluck my head
away and with my paw tear that meat and draw it unto me.”

So the fox reached for the meat, but – *snap!* The irons clapped fast!
Her head was safe, yet what she did not reckon – her paw was left
trapped within the irons.

The Rooster and the Dove

The rooster and the dove once came calling upon the peacock. As they were making their way home, the rooster asked:

– And what say you of our host today? Was he not a wretched creature? His pride, those dreadful legs of his, that vile voice – it is all quite unbearable!

The dove answered softly:

– I had no time to notice any of that, for I was long and deeply marvelling at the beauty of his head, the noble colours of his plumage, and the majestic splendour of his tail.

The Hermit and the Bear

There once was a hermit who raised a young bear, and through hunger, effort, and many a blow, he tamed him as one might tame a hound. The bear, devoted to his keeper, often brought him good cuts of game, fetched his firewood and water, guarded the hermit's hut, and saw to many other tasks.

One summer's day, the hermit lay down upon the grass and fell into a deep and pleasant sleep. The bear stretched out beside him, keeping watch and swatting away the swarms of flies that buzzed about the old man's head. One fly, in particular, was most persistent. Ten times, it appeared, the bear had chased it off, yet each time it returned to land upon the hermit's brow.

When the fly once more dared to settle on his master's cheek, the bear, angered beyond bearing, let out a roar:

– Wait, just wait! I shall teach you yet! You'll trouble my master no more!

And with that, he seized a great stone, took careful aim, and struck the fly – and with it, shattered the poor hermit's head.

The Fox, the Bear, and the Moon

One night, a bear and a fox were making their way through the forest when they came upon a river. As they neared a deep pool to drink, the full moon lay mirrored upon the still surface of the water.

– Look there! A clump of cheese! – cried the fox.

– What good is it, – grumbled the bear, – when it lies down below, at the bottom of a deep pool?

– Well now, Uncle Bear, I've a thought, – said the fox slyly. – What if we lap up the water? Then the cheese will lie bare at the dry riverbed!

– But how shall we lap up all that water?

– If we do it together, we just might.

So the fox began to lap, and the bear followed suit. But while the fox merely brushed the water with the tip of her tongue, the bear drank and gulped with all his might.

After some time, the bear's belly grew round and heavy with water. The fox cast him a scolding glance and said:

– You're lapping too lightly, Uncle Bear – press on harder, or there'll be no cheese for either of us!

The bear set to with fresh vigour, lapping until at last his belly could hold no more – and just burst.

That was what the fox had waited for. Quick as lightning, she seized his entrails and sat down to sup with relish.

The Fox and the Cock

A fox once came upon a cock. But the cock spied her from afar, and at once flew up into a tree and perched upon a branch. The fox came beneath and said:

– Master Cock, Master Cock, have you not heard? There was a great assembly where all beasts and all men agreed to live in peace. Only you and I are left! Come down now, that we too might seal the peace!

But the cock merely climbed one branch higher. Then said the fox again:

– Why climb so high? I told you to come down, that we may make peace!

– I see men coming yonder, with hounds at their heels, – the cock called down. – So if we are to seal our peace, let them be our witnesses!

The fox pricked up her ears, and hearing voices and the barking of dogs in the distance, she cried:

– Those men were not at our assembly, so we need not wait for them! – and in an instant, she slipped away down a dry ravine.

Treachery Pays the Price

A badger and a fox once joined up to go off to war together. Along the way, the fox asked the badger:

– Tell me, Jazo,³ – how many tricks do you have?

– I have three, – replied the badger.

– Well, I have seventy-seven! – said the fox, lifting her snout proudly.

– Good luck to you, – answered the badger, and they continued their way through the forest.

Not long after, behind a tree, they came upon a chunk of meat set in a sprung hunter's iron trap. The fox crept up and opened her jaws, but the badger warned:

– Careful now, lest they catch you!

The fox paused, but her hunger got the better of her – she bit down, and *snap!* The jaws of the trap clamped shut on her tail.

– What do I do now, dear Jazo!? – cried the fox.

– Here's what: when the hunter comes, lie still and don't so much as twitch a whisker. He'll think you're dead, and when he takes the pack off his back and sets down his rifle to open the trap, that's your chance to run.

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³ *Jazo* is an affectionate nickname for *jazavac*, meaning *badger* (t/n).

So it was. Early in the dawn, the hunter came to check his traps. The fox saw him and lay motionless. The man nudged her with his boot, but she didn't stir. Then he laid down his rifle and pack, undid the trap, and began resetting it – and just then, the cunning fox leapt away and fled.

When she met up with the badger again, she laughed and said:

– Well, we made good use of our trick, didn't we, Jazo?

– Aye, that we did, – the badger replied.

Onward they went, and once more they stumbled upon a sprung trap. The fox, still hungry, darted toward the meat again, and try as she might to be clever, the trap snapped shut on her tail a second time.

– And now, Jazo, what am I to do!?! – cried the fox.

– You said you have seventy-seven tricks. Use just one and you'll be free.

– I could... but tell me one more of yours. Maybe it'll get me out quicker!

– Very well: when the hunter comes, play about his feet, twist yourself round his legs and wag your tail like you're glad to see him. He'll think you're some tame fox gone astray and won't shoot. Once he opens the trap, make your escape.

The badger went on his way, and the fox stayed to wait for dawn. When the hunter came and saw her caught, she began to dance about him as best she could. Sure enough, the man thought her tame and bent to stroke her head. He released the trap, and while he was resetting it, the fox darted off once more.

She caught up with the badger again, and the two continued their journey. Before long, they came upon yet another sprung trap,

this one holding a larger piece of meat. Both were hungry, and emboldened, they decided to snatch a bite. But misfortune had it that this time the badger was caught.

– What now, dear fox!? – cried the frightened badger.

– You’re on your own now, I can’t help you! – replied the fox.

– Don’t say that, my dear fox! You remember the vow we made to help each other in trouble. Show me just one of your seventy-seven tricks – maybe it’ll save me!

– I’ve none for you. All my tricks are for myself.

The badger fell silent, thought for a moment, then said:

– I have but one trick left, though who knows if it will help. Still, since you’ve nothing for me, at least come close so we may kiss and part, for I fear I shall not leave this trap alive.

The fox came close, and the badger – *snap!* – grabbed her by the throat.

– Let go, Jazo, what are you doing!? – cried the fox.

Holding tight, the badger growled:

– We’ll wait for the hunter together now, dear fox!

At daybreak, the hunter arrived, and from afar, he saw the badger holding the fox in his jaws. He called out:

– Don’t let go, Jazo, brave lad! I give you my hunter’s word, I’ll set you free!

He came running, shot the fox dead, released the trap, and let the badger go.

The Mice Hanging a Bell on the Cat

In a barn full of all kinds of grain, a great many mice gathered. They feasted on the bounty and were always full and well-fed. But one day, a cat sneaked into the barn and began to catch and devour the mice. The mice panicked and hid in a large hole, where they started to plan how to deal with the cat. They debated for a long time until one mouse proposed that they find a bell and somehow hang it around the cat's neck. He said, "When the cat comes into the barn, we'll hear the bell and each of us can quickly scurry back to our holes!" Everyone agreed, except for one old, toothy, moustached mouse who stayed silent and shook his tail in disbelief.

They fetched a bell and brought it to the big hole, then discussed who would dare to hang it around the cat's neck while she was sleeping. No one dared, except for a young mouse who scolded the others for their cowardice, took the bell, and crept to where the cat was resting.

All the mice listened closely, waiting to hear the bell and watch for their friend's return. Suddenly, they heard the bell ringing and a loud squeak. They were terrified and asked the old mouse:

- What could that be, Uncle Red?
- Who can say, my children, what goes on in a barn? When your hero returns, you ask him. As for me, I'm moving my affairs from this village to another – one where the bell cannot be heard!

The Billy Goat and the Fox

In autumn, the billy goat sent word to all the goats in the village:

– Whoever does not come here ere St. Thomas's Day come should know that this year they will remain barren!

When the goats heard this, they all gathered before St. Thomas's Day to pay their dues. The billy goat mingled among them and would not let another male goat approach them that whole season.

But after a month, nothing remained of him but skin and bones; he was near death. When the shepherds saw him so wasted away, they chased the goat far from the village. There, a fox scented him out, approached him, and began to pity him for his failing strength. Watching the fox circle him, the goat asked her:

– Hey, fox, fox, I know what you're after! But before I die, tell me – does my beard still look like the Emperor's?

And the fox replied:

– Oh my billy goat, my billy goat, my foolish braveheart — what good is a fine beard when the head beneath it is foolish!

The Fox and the Wolf

An old wolf once got a bone stuck in his throat, and, unable to get it out, he suffered greatly for many a day. Wandering through the forest, he came upon a fox and was glad at the sight of her. He begged her for help:

– Fox, my sister, since fortune has brought thee to me, come now and pull this bone from my throat. It's wedged so that I can make no work of it. By my troth I swear to thee, and thee I give my solemn oath: the next catch I make, we shall divide it as true kin!

The fox eyed him warily and replied:

– Ah, my good brother, I've heard tell that you wolves have sworn never to let go of any meat that once enters your jaws.

– Fear not, dear fox, – said the wolf, – again I tell thee, I give thee my firm and faithful word! – And with that, he opened his jaws wide.

But when the fox leaned in and caught sight of all those teeth, she grew frightened and no longer wished to see whether or how the bone was lodged. Let alone would she dare set a paw between those jaws to pull it out. So she said:

– Ah, my brother, the bone lies deep in the throat, and it's grown so fast to the flesh that not even the most skilful with pincers could get it out! Best thou bide here a while, and I shall go seek a healer!

The Horse and the Ox Before the Lion's Judgment

One winter, after a barren year, a householder would throw but a little hay into the trough for his horse and ox. The two bore it patiently for a time, but went hungry. So, one day a quarrel broke out between them. Then the horse said to the ox:

– Stand back, you sluggard! There's naught for you tonight. This hay I brought upon my back from the fields and from the mountains! And if you heed me not, you'll feel both my hind legs, newly shod!

The ox laughed and answered him:

– You're a fool, dear horse, a right foolish beast! True, you fetched the hay and straw, but I ploughed the fields while you stood idle, gnawing and whinnying. And since you won't share this little with a brother, neither will I. Disobey me, and you shall meet my two long pointed horns!

The horse grew wroth, neighed aloud, and kicked the ox in the ribs with his hind legs, but the ox butted him back in the belly with his horns, and so they wounded each other grievously.

Seeing they might well die from their strife, the ox lowed with all his might and halted the duel:

– If we cannot come to a brotherly accord and share this meagre hay, let us go to judgment before the king of all beasts and four-footed creatures!

The horse agreed, and so, wounded and wrathful, they went at dawn to the cave of the old lion. When he saw them, the lion asked:

– What brings you so early this morning?

– By God, our master, – they answered, – it's bitter injustice and dire need that drove us here, to seek your judgment and know which of us is in the right.

The lion said:

– Lie here a while until my son and younger brother arrive. Since I grew old, I gave them the power to judge, that I might not sin in error – without them I pass no verdict.

And before long, the lion's son and brother came. The horse and ox rose to their feet and began accusing one another before the judges. The old lion listened, then spoke:

– This quarrel is light work to settle with justice. Hear now: When two beasts feed at one trough, neither shall ever eat his fill, still less pity the other. So, to you, brother, I give the ox; and to you, son, the horse. Feast well, that these poor wounded beasts may suffer no more!

The two lions leapt, each upon his prey, and the horse and ox cried out:

– Mercy, sire! Spare us! We quarrelled of our own folly – we shall make our own peace!

But the younger lions, as they seized them by the throat, answered:

– Had you any wit, you'd not have come before us. And what the king has judged – the king's word is final!

The She-Wolf and Her Son

The she-wolf fell ill, and seeing that she was like to perish of hunger, she called out to her son:

– Dost thou see, my son, how I am dying of hunger? I am thy mother, who did bear thee and rear thee. Bring me now a bite to break my fast, lest I lay a curse upon thy head!

– Ah, mother, curse me not, but hearken what befell me! The other day I caught a ram alive, and he was a full twenty oka in weight, and I was bringing him home for thee. But when I came down into a certain valley, he said to me: “Let me but gambol a while in this dale ere thou devourest me!” I, being young and weary from the road and the burden heavy upon my back, thought it no harm to let him sport a little and lay him down on the grass. But no sooner did he see I held him not, than he bolted through the field like a bullet from a musket. Yesterday I caught a she-goat and made to bring her to thee. But she wearied me, so I laid her down to rest. Fearing some trickery, I caught her by the tail with my teeth, but she said to me in a pitiful voice: “I see thou art tired. Lie down a moment and sleep; I shall keep watch that no shepherd spy thee.” Thinking every creature to be as true-hearted and just as myself, I believed her, and slept. But when I awoke – no goat, nor sign of her! Yet, now I go forth again to catch somewhat, and nevermore shall I trust another living soul!

So the young wolf went roaming the fields and came upon a colt. He sprang upon him, but the colt cried out:

– Stay, wolf, take not thy mother's curse with thee into the world beyond!

– What curse?

– Last year, when thy dam did slay my mother, she gave me a ferman⁴ that no wolf dare lay paw or fang on me! And if thou believest me not, look upon my hind leg and read the ferman I bear ever at my hoof!

The wolf drew nigh to see the ferman, and the colt let fly a mighty kick, driving all his front teeth into his jaws. The wolf limped home to his mother, weeping, and told her all that befell with the colt. But she said to him:

– Ah, my foolish son! Thy mother never did play in the fields with rams, nor sleep beside goats, nor read fermans writ at the horse's hoof. Dearly hast thou paid for thy schooling – but now, methinks, whatever thou seizest with thy jaws, thou'lt hold fast!

⁴ *Ferman* is a Turkish imperial decree or written order, here used ironically to suggest a false document carried by the colt to deceive the wolf (t/n).

The Two Horses

The peasants were driving their two horses to market. On each horse they had laid a sack of grass, so the beasts might have something to nibble on when they arrived – before they returned home under heavier loads.

On the long road, the two peasants stopped by a stream to rest, and, lying in the shade, soon fell asleep. The horses, seeing their masters fast asleep, whispered one to the other:

– Come now, while they sleep, let us draw close, head to head, pack to pack, and eat this grass. You take mine, and I'll take yours. When we reach the market, our masters will buy us fresh fodder. Is it not better to carry the grass full in the belly than to bear it hungry on our backs?

– You've thought well! – said the other horse. And they ate all the grass, each from the other's sack.

When the masters awoke and saw the empty sacks hanging limp across the saddles, they were angered, mounted the horses, and drove them on toward the market. As they travelled, one horse whispered to the other:

– Ah, we've done ill! It was lighter bearing grass than bearing our masters. But for this burden we now carry, perhaps they'll give us even more grass once they begin loading us!

When they reached the market, the peasants tied the horses to a stone and went about their business. The horses kept glancing about, waiting to see when the grass or hay would be brought, saying to each other:

– Still they bring not even a handful, let alone a sack!

Around midday, the peasants came back with a sack full of corn for each horse. Not long after, they returned again with sacks full of salt, and loaded them on. Then they drove the horses ahead of them, lashing them to hurry homeward. The horses once more whispered one to the other:

– What have we done! Would it not have been better to eat the grass in the market, when hunger took us, than in the mountain by the stream, when we were still full – and with green grass all around us, ours for the grazing?

– Well did the wise folk say, – answered the other horse. – He who bears a satchel on his back should never mind its weight – save when it hangs empty.

The Hog and the Cat

A hungry cat beheld the hog as from a full trough he lapped the grain's starch, then sighed and said unto him:

– Fortunate art thou, that thy trough is ever full without any toil or cunning of thine own! But I, poor wretch, if I do not catch by toil or steal by craft, long ere now would have perished of hunger!

The hog looked upon her and answered:

– Ah, my dear puss, the folk lie who say thou art cunning; for I have seen thee a right fool! If thou knewest why they feed me thus, thou wouldst envy me no longer. Wait but till autumn; then shalt thou see how they reckon with axe all that I have devoured, and thou, if they cast naught to thee of their own good will, by thy own craft shalt surely gain thy share!

The Oxen and the Cows

One day, all the oxen of the village gathered in a meadow and began to grumble about their masters: “Why is it,” said they, “that the cows, unlike us, neither plough the fields nor haul the hay, but rest the whole year long in the shade, whilst feeding on what we labour to bring home through the seasons? Well, by our horns, from this day forth it shall no longer be so! When there is ploughing to be done or carts to be pulled, let there always be one ox and one cow yoked together. That way, all shall be equal, and none may claim to be wronged!”

– Aye, so be it! – the oxen agreed, and they sent three young steers to summon all the village masters to the meadow, that they might declare what had been resolved. When the masters had gathered and heard out the oxen, the elder of the village spoke:

– You speak rightly. We too see that you and the cows are not equal. Had we not wished to preserve your honour and your name, we’d have long since set the same order among cows and oxen alike. But since you insist, we householders shall consent. Here is the new order: from this day forth, ye oxen shall be cows – give birth to calves and yield milk – whilst the cows shall be oxen – plough the fields and haul the hay!

At this the oxen looked one to another, until the eldest among them asked:

– What say you now, brothers?

Whereupon the young steers all cried out as one:

– Whosoever of you agrees to that, we do not!

And after them the younger oxen cried as well:

– By our horns, neither do we! Though we be gelded, we'll never consent to such a trade – better to be one year an ox than ten years a cow!

The Wolf and the Hedgehog

A well-fed wolf lay stretched beside a doe he had brought down, when lo! from somewhere a hedgehog came trotting up and, without so much as a word, began to feast upon the meat. The wolf cast him a sidelong glance and growled:

– Off with thee, prickly vermin! I did not hunt this for the likes of thee, but for mine own belly!

– But that’s just why I’ve come to dine, – the hedgehog answered stoutly, – to spite thee, that you may see I fear thee not and am the bolder beast!

The wolf, angered by such impudence, leapt up to tear him apart, but the hedgehog swiftly curled himself into a ball. Try as he might, the wolf could not approach from any side without catching a snoutful of sharp spines. So he halted, and the hedgehog said:

– Well, don’t you see now that I fear not thee?

– So be it, – said the wolf. – If thou art set on proving thy valour against mine, I’ll not deny thee thy dinner – there’s meat enough for us both. Yet, once thou’rt full, I shall have thee witness my true mettle. This trick of thine, curling and bristling, is but naked fear!

– And what sort of valour is thine? – asked the hedgehog.

– This sort, – replied the wolf. – Let us both run across yonder meadow to that stone. Thou shalt run upon all fours, and I but upon my two hind legs. Whosoever reaches the stone first is the true hero!

– I see no great valour in swift legs, – said the hedgehog. – Rather, let us climb to the top of yon cliff and leap from it. Then shalt thou see *my* bravery – and thy shame!

– Come then, you prickly fool and naught but a wretched beast! – laughed the wolf.

And so they climbed to the top of the crag. When they reached the edge, the wolf saw well that no creature save a bird could leap from so high and live. He grew fearful. Yet he thought to himself: “If this huddled scrap of a beast dare leap and survive, why should not I?” It was agreed that the hedgehog should leap first. He curled into a ball and flung himself down the cliff, tumbling and rolling all the way, until he landed safely below – no worse than if a shepherd had tossed a stone.

From the foot of the cliff, he called up to the wolf:

– Come now, Wolf! I have shown what I can do – let’s see thy bravery!

The wolf could do no other but leap. He sprang from the height – and was dashed upon the rocks below. The hedgehog drew near his broken body and said:

– Ah, Wolf, Wolf... so it goes with the mighty: yesterday thou wert a hero among beasts, and today – neither owl nor fowl!

The Old Man and Death

In a certain household, there were not enough hands to go around, so that it oft befell the ancient householder himself to fetch wood from the forest. One day, returning home with a heavy burden of firewood, worn down by age, weariness, and mayhap even hunger, he paused upon the path to rest. He sighed from his hardship and spake: "What good is life, so wretched and wearisome as this? A hundredfold blessed be Death! Verily, I'd sooner embrace her this very hour than be made young again.

As he thus murmured unto himself, Death, black and dreadful and monstrous to behold, overheard and straightway drew nigh. She called to him in a chilling voice:

– Lo, here am I, old man! I heard thy lament. What wouldst thou of me?

When the old man beheld her frightful visage, he was struck with terror. He bowed his neck low and answered:

– I did but call thee to beseech thy help – lift me this bundle of wood, I pray thee, for my hungry folk await at home, and they have no means to boil their supper without fire.

– Say then, – quoth Death, – shall I return for thee once the wood is laid down?

– I beg your pardon? – said the old man, feigning deafness. – My ears are dull and thick, I hear thee not so well. But fare thee well, and God be with thee.

The Fly upon the Ox's Horn

Two oxen were ploughing a field when down from the air there came a fly, and, out of sheer spite, she lighted upon the horn of one ox. There she perched, awaiting the moment when he should beg her to take her leave. But when she saw that her hopes were vain, she again, out of mischief, harnessed two gnats to a yoke, and began to furrow his horn, saying:

– I'll not stir from thy horn until thou entreat me. And once I've ploughed one horn, I shall yoke my oxen to the other – that thou mayest know who thy foe is.

Hearing this, the ox, untroubled, asked as he went on ploughing:

– Who is that aloft, making noise and tossing threats about?

– It is I! – answered the fly.

To which the ox replied:

– Well then, to tell thee plain – neither did I hear thee come, nor shall I know when thou art gone.

The Assembly of Cats and Mice

Once did the mice send forth a delegation to the cats, beseeching them to grant a solemn pledge that they should hunt them no more. In return, the mice would render unto them a yearly tribute, according to whatever terms might be agreed upon. When the delegation had laid their plea before the cats, an aged tomcat spake thus unto them:

– It were best that ye and we – all in number – gather upon a wide and open field on a day set in common, there to seal our covenant.

Then answered the mouse who led the embassy:

– Ours shall scarce agree to such a meeting, yet mayhap we might assemble beside yonder craggy knoll, and ye remain below, upon the plain.

Thus did they make their accord. And when the day was come, behold: all the cats and all the mice came to the appointed place – the cats arrayed across the meadow, the mice clustered near the rocky knoll. But soon the cats began to draw near unto the hillock, and the old tom, walking before them, called out to the mice:

– Come forth, dear mice, that we might behold one another face to face, and speak as brethren do, to agree how we may hereafter dwell in peace and harmony.

The mice began peeping forth from holes and crevices. Yet one ancient mouse, grey and wise, put forth no more than his whiskers from a narrow cleft. And when he beheld that same old tomcat, with all the cats now creeping close, he cried aloud:

– Children, whoso is of my blood, stand ye close to your burrows!

The Tailless Fox

Once, a wolf and a fox fell to quarrelling over a kill, and so bitter grew the strife that it came to blood. In the brawl, the wolf bit off the fox's tail. Seeing that should the quarrel drag on, the fox might lose her very head, she yielded and said:

– Enough now of spite and scuffle – let us rather make peace and bind ourselves as kindred.

The wolf agreed, and they swore brotherhood, then went each on their way.

Some time after, they met again upon a frozen meadow. Said the wolf:

– Tell me true, dear sister – hast thou missed me?

– Truth be told, – the fox replied, – not so very much. Yet oft did I think on thee whenever I looked back – and found no tail there.

The Brotherhood of the Dog and the Wolf

A wolf and a dog once swore themselves as blood-brothers. Then said the dog to the wolf:

– Come now, dear brother – why shouldst thou evermore roam the woods in fear and famine? Were it given thee, wouldst thou not rather dwell here by my good master’s hearth, in peace and without dread, beside a brimming trough? Let me tell thee, there’s naught else to do here but now and then bark a little whilst lying ‘fore the house, and by night circle the yard.

– By my soul, that’s wise counsel indeed, – the wolf replied. – And I’ll heed thy word. But brother, I’ve long meant to ask thee – what is that thing thou ever bearest ‘round thy neck?

– That? – said the dog. – ‘Tis a leather collar by which my master doth sometimes tie me to a post – lest I sink my teeth into some friend of his.

Hearing this, the wolf said:

– Well then, if thy master binds thee and lets thee loose as it pleaseth him, pardon me, brother, but I must think twice ere I follow thee.

The Wolves and the Foxes and the Ancient Horse

A certain peasant had a horse so ancient that it could scarce take a bite, and seemed but a step from death. So the man, seeing there was no more use in keeping him, led him far from home into a forest and left him there.

The wolves and foxes soon caught wind of this and came to mourn him. And when they saw the horse so worn and feeble that death seemed near, they lay down round about him.

As the gathered beasts stared upon him, the old horse spake:

– Off with you now, go your ways, lest you waste your time beside me. I've no mind to die just yet.

But the beasts replied:

– In sooth, we've no great business elsewhere, and we've no heart to leave thee so weak and lone

The Cow and the Ox

An old ox, so worn with age that he could no longer leave the stall, would always low in reply whenever he heard a cow moo nearby, calling her to come to him. The cows would come, but with ever less frequency, and he would scold them for neglecting him so.

Once he said to one of them:

– It's not right that you pay me no heed, when you well remember how we frolicked in the meadows while I was yet young!

But the cow answered him:

– Oh, my poor old mottled friend! Thou once wast – and art no more. But now thy son, Big-shoulders, holds the pasture, and his brother, Blue-back, too. Hark – canst thou not hear them calling me from the field?

The Sparrow and the Snake's Eggs

One spring, a sparrow and a sparrow-hen joined together to build a nest and raise their chicks, and they began gathering straw to weave their home. As he flitted to and fro collecting bits, the sparrow stumbled upon a hollow in some brush and found inside a nest already made, with five eggs lying in it. Delighted, he flew merrily back to his mate and said:

– I've found us a ready-made nest, tucked away in a hidden place – and five eggs in it already! I don't know what kind of bird they belong to, but why should we labour and wear ourselves thin, when all we need to do is take turns warming the eggs and raising the young?

But the sparrow-hen replied:

– My dear husband, I'll have no part in it. I know those eggs are not of our kind. Even if they were, they are the fruit of another's toil – some other father and mother built that nest, another mother laid those eggs. I will not have them curse our brood.

At that, the sparrow grew angry and declared:

– Then I'm no longer your husband!

– To the good! – said the sparrow-hen, standing firm. And with that, they parted ways.

Soon, each of them found a new mate. The sparrow-hen's new husband worked with care, gathering straw until their nest was nearly complete. As for the sparrow, he convinced his new bride to move into the nest he'd found, and together they began taking turns sitting on the eggs. But lo! One day, as the sparrow sat upon the eggs, a great serpent slithered in, sank its fangs into his neck, and devoured him whole. Not long after, the sparrow's new mate returned from the fields – and what did she see? The coiled serpent lying atop the eggs, and from its jaws still dangled the sparrow's tail.

She flew off at once, crying out to the dead:

– You sinned – and paid for it with your life!

The Cat and the Snake

A cat spied a snake in a meadow and leapt toward it. But the snake, seeing she could not reach her hole in time, coiled herself and raised her head toward the cat. Then the cat asked:

– Why did you not slither off to where you meant to go?

And the snake replied:

– And why did *you* stop, when you'd already sprung at me?

– To have a better look at you, – said the cat.

– Well then, – said the snake, – if you've seen me, why not go back the way you came, instead of still staring at me?

– Oh, but it pleases me to watch you – so bright and pretty, coiling and swaying like a slender maiden before a young lad. And, besides, I've nothing else to do.

– To speak true, – said the snake, – I've no great business myself. I spent all winter sleeping in a hole, and came out now just to warm in the sun. I'll wait here until you go on your way, and then I'll be off wherever the road takes me.

Hearing this, the cat began to step back, retreating slowly, never taking her eyes off the snake. Then, quick as a blink, the snake darted into a crevice and called out from inside:

– Come closer now, let us share a kiss!

– I don't kiss your kind, – said the cat, – for I've stuck my nose near your holes before. But you come out here and we'll have a game.

– Nay, nay, – the snake replied, – I don't come out into the meadow for the likes of you. I've heard many a tale from my sisters. Not one who dared cross claws with cats lived to boast of it, and those who played with them never kept their tails!

Two Donkeys in One House

A certain peasant owned two donkeys by whose labour he made his living – loading them with firewood each day and driving them to market. He fed them little, so they were more often hungry than full. Long did they endure, until one day, as they stood by their empty trough, they began to talk:

– I'm not surprised, brother, – said one, – that our master treats us like beasts, near to killing. What does surprise me is that he never once asks: "Shall I load you again today? Can you bear it?"

– Don't be surprised at him, – said the other, – but at us. If we don't know how to speak to him, we at least know how to fall down under the load, and then let him do the carrying.

– That word of yours is not wise, brother, but plain foolish, – replied the first. – I've served this master a little longer than you, and I've tried just that. But all I got for it was a beating. He struck me with the cudgel till I rose again.

The Lion and the Hare

One day, a lion grew terribly hungry and set off across the barren heath to find himself some dinner. Blind luck led him to the burrow of a hare who, upon catching sight of the lion, leapt and bolted – and the hungry, enraged lion gave chase.

He had nearly overtaken the hare when, all of a sudden, a young and plump stag sprang from a nearby thicket. At that very moment, the lion thought: “Better I catch the stag – he’s large and fat. What would I do with this little hare? He’s hardly a morsel. Once I’ve eaten the stag, I’ll easily come back for the hare – I know where his burrow lies.”

So off he dashed after the stag. But the stag, swift and slender-legged, quickly gained ground across the meadow – not even a bullet could have caught him – and soon vanished into the forest.

– Go and try to find him in the woods now! – panted the lion, gasping from the chase. – I’d best go back to that hare. Better to nibble something than wander these hills without a meal.

He returned to the burrow, but the hare was gone, having slipped far away.



MONTENEGRIN FOLK TALES



Alas – A Brother Drinks Blood Sooner Than a Dog

In a village, there dwelt two brothers who, on their father's death, remained upon the undivided homestead. The elder was the son of the father's first wife, and the younger the child of the second. When the elder married, and he was of a choleric temper, he could no longer bear to look upon his stepmother or his brother; he came to loathe them and did them all manner of harm.

The younger brother bore his brother's cruelty for many a day, but one time his patience broke when the elder raised a cudgel against his mother and drove her from the threshold of their home; so he resolved to go to the village chieftain to lay a complaint and beg that the land be divided.

– Pray thee, chieftain, divide us before we slay one another, lest a curse and a bloody mark fall upon us!

After he had been heard, the chieftain said to him:

– Go home; endure until Sunday when I come with the priest to divide you.

The poor fellow went home. Yet, as he passed the byres, the chieftain's wolfhound sprang upon him and began to tear at him where he stood. The chieftain heard the outcry, rushed out, and scarce freed the lad from the dog's jaws. Then he demanded:

- Why on earth, lad, were thy hands not raised, stone, staff, aught else, why didst thou not defend thyself but let the dog maul thee?
- By my troth, chieftain, I might have defended myself somehow, yet I meant to try which drinks blood the fouler, thy hound, or my brother. And so, now I have seen that thy dog does not know how to slaughter as my brother does.

How Much for the Fowl, Vlah?

A city lad once fell in love with a comely, young village maiden. He won her hand and bore her to the town. Yet ere they were wed, he sent her to school, that she might be taught and learn the manners and customs of gentlefolk. But a few days after their wedding, he took her on a walk, and they chanced upon the market where peasants displayed their wares. The maiden, still but recently a village lass, beheld her old father in his plain peasant garb, stooped against the winter in a patched coat, and before him two or three pairs of hens. Yet, when she drew near, she would not greet him as her father, but, now a lady and learned in townly ways, spoke thus:

– How much for the fowl, Vlah?¹

Her father gazed upon her and knew her, saying:

– Ah, child, know you not? At an ill hour, you became a lady, and at the ninth, you forgot your mother tongue! Yet it was you who sold them only last year!

¹ *Vlah* is a traditional term used by Slavic peoples in the Balkans to refer to a member of a pastoral or Romance-speaking community. In this story, it portrays the father as a representative of his rural, peasant heritage (t/n).

The Maiden and Lord Jovo

A maiden once journeyed to the market, a pail of milk upon her head, and spake to herself as she went, pondering how best she might earn her living by buying and selling. And she reckoned thus:

– When I reach the market, I shall sell this milk and buy a hen. I will tend her until she lays eggs, and from them hatch her brood. When the chicks are grown, I will sell the hen and the young at the market, and with the silver I shall buy a lamb. I will feed it until it bears young, then sell ewe and lamb, and with the gain purchase a calf. I will nurture it until it calves, and then sell both cow and calf at the market, and with that gold I shall buy a red gown, like unto the priest's wife. Then shall the lads speak among themselves: "What a comely maiden, in her red gown!" And I shall strut and preen as doth a peahen.

While thus lost in her imaginings, she met Lord Jovo, who doffed his cap and spake unto her:

– God help thee, maiden!

But she, forgetting the pail of milk upon her head, curtsied in the manner proper, and the pail fell before her. Milk was spilt upon the ground. Lord Jovo asked her:

– What hath befallen, maiden?

– Woe is me! – quoth she, – May all that I have gained be swallowed by the earth! And I would forgive all else, but the red gown, I can never forget!

The Master and the Day-Labourer

Once upon a time, a well-to-do master sought a man to dig a spacious garden, and he found a poor soul who consented. The man demanded his wages to be measured in small coins, weighed against a modest stone upon the scale; yet the master required that he work until the sun should set.

And the labourer dug and toiled all that day until the sun had vanished, then set aside his spade, intending to rest. But the master intercepted him, saying:

– Leave not thy work undone! If the sun has set, see, the moon riseth, and they are brothers!

What could the poor man do? He took up his spade once more and laboured on beneath the moon until the first light of dawn. When morning came, the master brought forth the scales and began to weigh the coins, placing the modest stone upon the pan. But the labourer lifted a great stone, weighing many oka, and said:

– Place this stone upon the scale also, for it is the brother of the smaller stone!

– What brother? – cried the master. – Did we not agree that I should weigh thy wages by this smaller stone alone?

– Aye, we agreed, – said the labourer, – but we agreed also that I should labour beneath the sun, and lo! I toiled beneath the moon likewise. Therefore, the greater stone must bear its brother's weight.

So they came before the court, and the judges declared: “Since this man hath laboured more than any, the master shall pay him wages higher than any man's!”

She Avenged Herself

A certain woman once begged a little wares on credit of a shopkeeper. The man was miserly, and when he heard her request, he brusquely refused her in rude words.

– Very well, – said the woman, – mark my word, I will have my revenge! – and with that she left his stall.

Some time after, the same woman returned to that very shop. She asked for a silk kerchief, and the shopkeeper handed one for her to choose. Having picked and paid for it, she took her purchase and strolled about the shop to look at the other goods. Presently, another customer entered, and the shopkeeper's eye left her. The woman had been waiting for this chance, so she thrust a smouldering cigarette into the silken embroidery she had just bought. When the silk began to give off smoke, the shopkeeper grew alarmed, but, seeing that it was not his wares that burned but the woman's, he cried:

– Woman, behold thy kerchief is afire, and thou dost nothing!

– Let it burn, – she replied; – the devil will carry it off soon enough!

Startled by such an answer, the shopkeeper pressed her with questions – who was she, who had she at home, how lived she? She answered, weeping:

– I have a husband who hath walked the crooked path. He has fallen in love with another woman and cannot bear me. He gave all I had to that woman. Then he sent me to buy this very kerchief to give to her. I must obey him, such is my plight!

Having said this with tears, she took her scorched kerchief and went away. But instead of going home, she drew near the shopkeeper's house, crouched outside, and began to wail. The shopkeeper's wife heard the crying, came out, and asked what ailed her. When the woman answered that a pain had seized her belly, the mistress took her by the hand, led her inside, and placed her by the hearth that she might be warmed.

– Shall I fetch thee a cup of water? – the mistress asked.

The woman nodded, and while the mistress went for water, she lifted the hearth-rug and shoved the scorched kerchief beneath it. When the mistress returned and the woman had drunk, she said she felt better, thanked her hostess, and went away.

That evening the shopkeeper came home and, weary, took his seat in his customary place. He observed that the hearth-rug lay awry and set it straight. As he did so, his hand struck and drew forth the very embroidery he had sold. He recognised it at once and turned ashen as a rag. He straightway jumped to the wild thought that the woman's husband came to his own wife. Enraged and crying so that all the neighbours might hear, he drove his wife into the street. By morning, everyone knew that the shopkeeper had turned his wife out.

That same day, while he sat sullen in his shop, the woman who had bought the silk kerchief came again and asked for more.

– To the devil with thee and thy kerchief and thy husband! – he cried. – Go away, and never step across my threshold again!

– But good man, – she answered, – at least tell me what sin have I wrought that thou shouldst take it out upon me?

When he would not listen, she kept stubbornly begging him for the silk, and then spake thus:

– If thou sell me not another kerchief, I have no home to go to, for I dare not return. When I bought this from thee yesterday my belly was seized with a pain in the street, and, by good fortune, I found myself before the house of a kind woman who took me in and warmed me. Sitting there I forgot my kerchief and know not now which house it was.

The shopkeeper bethought him straightaway: he had driven his blameless wife forth for nothing. He at once ordered his servants to fetch her home and to bring the kerchief.

When all was set to rights, the woman turned and said:

– See now, I have had my revenge!

The Priest and the Old Woman

After a service, the priest spake unto his flock:

– Upon the coming holy day, let every soul be present in the church, both man and woman, that I may behold if all within mine parish know how rightly to make the sign of the cross!

And a certain old woman spake:

– Shall I come also, father?

– Come, grandmother! And if thou makest the sign aright, a sack of grain shall be thine, – quoth the priest, that all might hear.

The old woman rejoiced exceedingly, and she did practice the sign of the cross, both by day and by night, until the saint's day² drew near and it was time to go again unto the church. That very morning she rose early, took with her her son, and gave him the sack, then went straightway to the church before all the folk, that she might stand foremost, that the priest might behold her first.

When the service was ended, the priest went forth to observe how his parishioners made the sign of the cross.

– I shall go first! – cried the old woman, stepping before him.

² *Saint's day* is a feast day in the Orthodox Church honoring a particular saint. In folk tradition, such days were occasions for attending church, observing rituals, and sometimes for competition or display of piety (t/n).

– Very well, grandmother, come, show me thy cross!

The old woman did straighten herself, and she did gather as gracefully as she could three fingers of her right hand, and made the sign:

Upon her brow:

– In the Name...

Upon her breast:

– Of the Father...

Upon the right side:

– And of the Holy Ghost...

Upon the left:

– Amen!

– And where is the Son, grandmother? – asked the priest.

– Behold him here, I swear on my soul! He brought the sack for the grain!

The Lord's Bacon

A certain peasant was debtor to the lord for a cartload of oats and a cartload of barley; they agreed that he should pay on St. Demetrius' day, or at the latest on Archangel's day. The first day came, and there stood the lord to collect his due, but the peasant had not a coin, nor aught alive in the house save one great, fat hog.

– Money by Wednesday! – cried the lord.

– I have none, my lord, – answered the peasant, – by both worlds, naught but this hog. If God will, by Archangel's day, if I feed him a while more, this hog will fetch two ducats more.

– I wait not, nor will I come begging for my money twice! – quoth the lord. With that he drove the hog before him, and the debtor's wife and children set up lamentation and weeping.

– Weep not, – the peasant soothed them. – The lord has taken the live beast, and I will, God willing, bring him home dead.

When he learned that the lord had caused the hog to be slain, the peasant crept one night to the lord's house and slipped under the eaves into the loft. There he found bacon hanging to dry; he cut it down and slung it over his shoulders. But the bacon was heavy, and a thin joist beneath his foot snapped, and with all his burden he fell straight upon the bed where the lord lay sleeping.

The lord started up and, peering in the dark with fear, cried:

– Who is this in my house this night?

– Cry not out! – answered the peasant. – I am the horned devil, and I have brought thee a bit of bacon as a gift, that thou mayst know what our bacon is like.

The lord grew more terrified and began crossing himself, crying:

– I will not, I will not have thy bacon! Bear it hence from my house!

– Ah, – says the peasant, – if thou wilt not, then lift it upon my back!

So the lord lifted it, and the peasant went out by the doorway and home.

He Went to Venice for a Load of Flax

A certain man of Kotor had married for the second time, and he asked his wife if she knew how to spin. When she answered that she did, the husband began to buy bales of Venetian flax in the shops. But soon he discovered that the shopkeepers, reselling the flax, took much more than their due, and he waxed wroth, saying unto himself: "Usurers and heartless folk! No longer shall ye fleece me as a simple goat! If hitherto I have been a foolish owl, henceforth shall I be a hawk and a wolf!" Resolved in his mind, he set forth for Venice, revealing his purpose to none, and embarked upon the first ship that sailed from the Bay to Venice.

Upon arrival, he made an inquiry where he might purchase flax at the cheapest rate. And wandering through the Venetian markets, he found bales priced a ducat less than those of the shopkeepers from whom he had bought at home; there he did buy one.

Returning home, his wife questioned him why he had journeyed to Venice and whether he had bought aught there. Proudly he answered:

– Behold how wise and thrifty a husband thou hast! And behold also that our neighbour Gašpar³ shall know that I, too, understand the craft of trade.

³ *Gašpar* a local steward or treasurer; the name is a regional form of Casper, one of the Biblical Magi. Derived from *ghaz* ("treasure") and *bar* ("to manage"), it reflects his role as overseer and witness in the story (t/n).

The Hare in the Wood, the Pot on the Fire⁴

The wife of a poor peasant had been shorn of all rags and had not a whole shift to her back; she went about in tatters. Her husband could bear to look at her, so poor and ragged, any longer, so he said to her:

– By my faith, wife, since we have saved a few coins, I will go to town and buy thee a gown, and a few other things to clothe thee in.

The woman rejoiced. After she had seen her husband off, she shut the door, stripped the scant rags from her, and cast them upon the hearth to burn. There, naked she stood and waited for her husband.

At an ill hour the husband came back, knocked at the door and cried:

– Open, woman, I am come!

– I cannot, I am naked! But if thou hast bought me raiment, thrust it through the window that I may dress myself first!

– I bought thee no raiment, for naught that would do I found; I bought a goose!

⁴ *The hare in the wood, the pot on the fire* is a literal translation of a folk saying meaning that preparations are made, but the main goal has not yet been achieved. “The cart before the horse” would be an English variant (t/n).

The Unlucky Man Flees from Fortune

It is told that there once lived a man, diligent and honest, yet whatever he put his hand to turned to loss, never to gain. Whoever knew him pitied him and sought to help him in some way, but he would ever answer them the same:

– 'Tis in vain, good people, there is no betterment for me when God wills it not! Who is born beneath an unlucky star, misfortune shall follow him from swaddling-cloth to shroud!

Now a wealthy man who knew him resolved to test whether it was indeed as the poor wretch claimed. So he bade the man dine with him, and secretly instructed his own son to lay a purse of money in plain sight at the crossroads, saying to him:

– Hide thyself by the wayside and watch, lest another should come upon it and carry the money away. But when our guest passes by, let him take it.

The son obeyed. After the meal, the unfortunate man gave thanks and departed. When he came to the crossroads, he halted, drew forth his tobacco-pouch, filled his pipe, struck a spark, drew a few puffs, and then, without once casting his eyes to the ground, passed straight along the road.

The wealthy man's son, seeing that the fellow had walked past the purse of money, called out:

– Kum, O kum!⁵ Thou hast dropped thy purse of money when thou struck thy pipe! Turn thee back and take it up!

But the poor man answered him:

– Nay, my son, I lost it not, but rather he who is more fortunate than I! For had it been mine to lose, be sure I never would have found it again!

⁵ *Kum* is a ritual kinship term used in Balkan cultures. It can refer to a godfather, best man at a wedding, or a close friend, bound by sacred promise. In this tale, it is used as a familiar form of address between men (t/n).

Good Advice Is Better Than Gold

It is told that there once lived a man, diligent and honest, who, having spent many years abroad in service, had saved but three ducats, with which he now journeyed home. Along the way he entered a tavern full of folk, all talking except for one who kept silent.

– What ails this man? – he asked the others. – Is he angry, or foolish?

– He is a sage, – they answered him. – Every word he speaks is worth a ducat.

The man gazed upon him in silence and thought: “Why should I not test him for a single ducat? A wise word may be worth more than all the money in the world.” And so he addressed the silent man, offering him a ducat:

– Since all say thou art wise, let me also hear what thou wilt tell me!

The sage turned to him, took the ducat, and said:

– When thou comest upon a murky brook, step not across it!

The man thought: “That I knew already! What a fool I am to have given him a ducat.” He sat awhile, watching the silent man, and then, reconsidering, wished to test him once more:

– Tell me another thing.

The sage accepted a second ducat and replied:

– When thou enterest a tavern where an old man dwells with a young wife, tarry not to spend the night there!

The man muttered: “What folly is this!” Yet he could not resist, and a third time asked:

– Speak once more!

– Raise, but strike not, – said the sage; and then he turned away in silence.

The man lamented having spent all he had on these few cryptic words, yet the ducats were lost and he set off sorrowful.

As he journeyed, he came upon a brook with no bridge. The water was turbid, the bottom unseen, yet it seemed he might cross with only his shoes removed. As he began to take off his shoes, he recalled the sage’s words and stopped. While he sat pondering what to do, a Turk rode up on horseback, followed by a servant driving a loaded mule.

– Why sit here, Vlah? Cross the brook! – commanded the Turk sternly.

– Go first, I dare not pass before thee, replied the man.

Hardly had the Turk entered the brook when both horse and rider sank beneath the swirling waters. The man and the servant watched the whirlpool that swallowed horse and rider; when it became clear they would not resurface, they resolved to divide the spoils. In the cargo were bags filled with gold coins.

Thus the man continued on until, toward evening, he came to a tavern where a great elm had grown. Entering, he saw a young and comely hostess, and presently her husband, a feeble old man. The

hostess, moving among the guests, swayed her hips and displayed her charms. The man recalled the sage's warning and would not linger there to spend the night, but pressed onward.

He journeyed long until, near sunset, he came upon a tavern a day's walk from his home. Weary, he resolved to stay there for the night. Already from the door he recognised the voice of his wife, and then saw her sitting at a table with a young man unknown to him. He sat at another table from which he might observe her unseen. His wife treated the young man with gentle care and even stroked his head; he felt his throat tighten with jealousy.

When night fell, the guests retired to their rooms, and the woman lay with the young man. All soon fell asleep, yet he remained awake, burning with jealousy and rage. At last he could bear it no longer, and with knife in hand approached them, intending to strike. As he leaned above the bed and raised his arm, he recalled the sage's words and stayed his hand, resolving to learn the young man's identity come morning.

When the guests gathered for breakfast, he sat to await his wife and the young man. A traveller who had just arrived recounted how, in the tavern under the elm, an old host had been struck down with an axe, and the blame had fallen upon some unfortunate stranger who had lodged there. Again the man recalled the sage's words. Soon his wife appeared with the young man, and they sat at the same table. Unable to endure further, he approached and spoke with her, yet did not reveal himself:

- Who is this comely young man?
- My son! – she answered proudly.
- And where is thy husband?

– He has gone abroad in service, and I have yet heard no tidings of him. What am I to do? I live with my son, awaiting his return.

Then the man let fall a tear of joy and revealed himself to his wife and son. Later, he sought to find the sage whose words had preserved him and give thanks, but he was nowhere to be found. Those who remembered him said he was no ordinary man, but a saint.

The Unfaithful Wife

In a certain village, there lived two sworn brothers, close as if born of the same womb, and ever ready to help one another. One of them had a wife who proved unfaithful; when his sworn brother perceived all that she did, he warned him tenderly to beware, saying she might undo him. But the man would not believe and praised his wife, saying there was none better in all the world.

So it went on awhile until it was plain that words availed not. Then the sworn brother bethought him how to open his friend's eyes, and he proposed a trial of the wife. Reluctant and angry that his friend should speak thus of his wife, the other consented. At his comrade's counsel he slew a piglet, buried it behind the house, and, all bloody, entered the house and cried:

– Wife, help me wash this blood from me! – and he stripped off his shirt and held it out.

When the woman saw her husband so blood-stained, she cried out:

– What hast thou done? Woe is me, this night and for ever!

– Be silent, wife, – he said, – I adjure thee by my kin that none hear. A little while since I killed a man and buried him behind the house.

At that word the woman started as though shot, and sprang through the door and ran through the village, crying with all her voice:

– O! Is there no one anywhere? My husband hath killed a man!

When the folk heard this, they ran and burst into the house; there indeed sat the master of the house all bloody. They bound him forthwith and took him to a place that he should tell them where the man lay buried. When they had dug, there they found the piglet. The assembled villagers stood abashed; then the sworn brother spake before them all:

– This my sworn brother did this for trial's sake, to prove his wife. Ye all know what manner she is; he would not see it, therefore I devised this test that he might learn for himself.

An Insult Repaid with Kindness

A man from Berane was passing through a nearby village when rain overtook him, so he turned into the first house he came upon. Inside, he found many people gathered. That day, the host was celebrating his family's patron saint's feast. The master of the house welcomed him and, after toasting all his friends, raised his glass to the stranger as well:

– Good health to you, friend, who comes to me today unbidden!

A little later, he toasted a second time:

– Good health to you, my uninvited guest!

And a third:

– Good health to you, neither payer nor repayer!

Thus, the host went on toasting several times, while the poor man from Berane blushed with shame. When the rain stopped, he continued on his way.

Not long afterwards, a drought brought scarcity of grain, which also struck the village where the host lived. In distress he saddled his horse and rode to Berane, hoping to buy enough grain to feed his family. He searched the whole day, but there was little grain to be found, and that at a dear price. Toward evening, he was noticed by the man from Berane who had once been his guest. Recognising him, the Beranin called out:

– Where are you bound, friend?

– I came to buy grain, but there's little to be had, and what there is costs dearly, – replied the man, staring at him but not recognising who he was.

– I have plenty of grain, – said the Beranin. – Come with me, we'll come to terms easily enough.

The man rejoiced and went with him. His host's household welcomed him kindly, set him at their table to share supper, and gave him a comfortable bed for the night, while his horse was fed with hay and oats. In the morning, the Beranin loaded his horse with a hundred oka of fine wheat.

– How much do I owe you, brother? – asked the man as he prepared to leave.

– Nothing at all. Drive on!

– How can it be nothing?

– I give this to you, – said the Beranin, – for the welcome you gave me when I was at your slava, when you called me neither payer nor repayer.

The Peasant and His Billhook

One Sunday, a peasant set off to church, taking with him a billhook so that after the liturgy, he might cut some hazel shoots for wattle fencing. When he put one foot through the church door, which was very narrow and low, he could not get the other one in. He strained with all his might, but in vain. Frightened and exhausted, he cried out:

– Help me, Father, for heaven's sake!

– What's the matter, man? Ill fortune be upon you? – called the priest from the altar.

– What do you mean, Father?! Can't you see the saints themselves bar me from the church? This morning I stole a sack of potatoes from my kum, and now his curse comes crashing down upon me!

When the priest came to him, he saw that the peasant had stuck his billhook crosswise behind his belt, and the two ends were caught on either side of the doorframe. The priest set the billhook upright against his back, and the man slipped inside.

Terrified, the peasant began kissing every icon in sight, and after the liturgy, he gave the priest ten para⁶ for having freed him from a dreadful sin. As he left, he said:

⁶ *Para* is a small coin of low value in Montenegro, often used in folk tales to denote modest payment or savings (t/n).

– Truly, Father, to you I swear by this world and the next, never in all my life have I seen a smaller church and sterner saints!

The Peasant and the Lawyer

Once a peasant set out for a nearby town to sell wool and tithes, and with the money he intended to buy lamp oil, salt, and other necessities. After selling what he had brought and buying what he needed, he began wandering about to look at the town, and he noticed a steady stream of people entering and leaving one house. Curious, he asked a passerby:

- Where are they going? Is it a church or a market?
- Neither, – replied the stranger. – This is where the lawyer sits.
- And what is a lawyer?
- He is a man like any other, only he sells wisdom for money.

Hearing this, the peasant resolved to see this sage for himself. He entered and took a seat in the waiting room.

Once the lawyer had dismissed all others, only the peasant remained before the door. The lawyer asked:

- What do you want? Do you have a dispute with someone?
- I have none.
- Perhaps you wish to sell or buy something?
- I have already done that.
- Then what would you want from me?

– I wish only to see you and ask how much you charge for your wisdom.

Seeing the simple ways of the peasant, the lawyer asked:

– What is your name?

– Ćetko.

– And your surname?

– Drekalović.

The lawyer took his ledger, began writing something, tore a sheet of paper from the book, then he folded it several times and handed it to the peasant, saying:

– Here is a little wisdom; give me a pleta⁷ in return.

The peasant handed over one pleta, wrapped the note in a cloth, and tucked it into his bosom.

When he returned home, he sat down to supper with his wife. She said:

– Let us bring in the grain from the threshing floor; I fear rain tonight.

The household would not agree – some said it would not rain, others insisted they could wait until morning. Then the peasant rose and said:

– Stand aside! I have wit enough for every work!

He called the priest and handed him the note to read aloud:

– Tell us, Father, what wisdom has to say!

The priest read:

– Ćetko Drekalović, whatever can be done today, let it never be left for tomorrow.

– Ah! – cried Ćetko. – What would idle wisdom say! Blessed be his pleta – now, everyone to their work!

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⁷ *Pleta* is an archaic term for a small sum of money, a handful of coins, or a silver coin (t/n).

Ćoso and the Sorceresses

A man came home late one night, and his wife, who had been waiting for him in worry, called when she saw him at the door:

– Where have you been so long, good man? 'Tis midnight, and you cannot come home like other folk!

– Woe knows him better than any other man! – he answered.

– Who do you mean? – she asked.

– Ćoso, who else?

– Ćoso who?

– Ćoso Mišan's son, the foulest of the foul!

– What has befallen him? – the wife asked as he sat by the hearth to warm himself.

– A crash, that he should be dashed past the brothers, – he began. Under that Black Beam, on this side of the market, the Gabelji⁸ spread their rugs. Ćoso came and stood before them and spoke, recounting some matters of import. The Gabelji spied him and leapt from each side, swinging their cudgels to beat him, while one Gabelji woman clutched his sleeve and would not let go. Such grave shame befell him from every side, foul insults rang out, and he, vile wretch that

⁸ *Gabelji* refers to the itinerant Roma clans of the region, often engaging in various trades or performances (t/n).

he was, could do naught but stoop and suffer. I could not bear to see him come to ruin, so I sprang and seized his hand to pull him away, crying: "What, poor wretch, have you come here to meet your doom?!" I drew him, but that accursed Gabeljka would not loosen her hold, and the rest of the Gabelji grew ever fiercer, lashed and struck with their cudgels, hacking and hewing with relentless rage. Here, methought, misfortune hath seized me as well, so I laid hands on my pistol and brandished it toward them. The Gabelji then shrank back and let that ill one go. He was drained of blood, pale as a rag, no drop to stain a razor. I ask him, "Why did you go there, you poor soul?" and he began to make his excuse: "How, pray, couldst thou ask why? Did they not take that wretched scrap of meat from me in broad daylight!" Then I asked if his house had been open, and he said it had, that he had been sitting in the midst of it. "How then did the Gabelji take thy meat? Were you asleep?" said I. He swore he had been awake.

– How, pray, could they take his meat then? – my wife wondered at this tale.

– You'll scarce believe what came to pass; thus did Čoso relate it to me, word for word:

"I cannot tell you, for you will mock me. Yet I will tell even so. Long since, as you know, the Gabelji women pass here and make certain charms and protections against evil spirits. And behold, just yesterday, two of them came together, right within the midst of my house. They offered to do me some service for a florin, and I thought, 'Why not try it?' So I asked, 'Could you make me grow a moustache?' They answered, 'We will; 'tis the evil spirit that took them from thee above thy mouth. Give us a florin and the finest moustaches shall grow.' And, to my doom, I believed this was the truth and gave the florin. Then one of them drew out a sheet and read something, and said, 'It shall be well, only bring a blanket and a baking-dome!' I fetched them, and they made me sit in

the middle of the house, covered me wholly with the blanket, and set the baking-dome on my head. Then the other began to strike the dome with a stick, chanting:

‘Strike, strike upon the pan, let mighty whiskers grow! Tear, cut, and heed not, look high, not low, place mine into thine so! End not, nor repent, here I shall chant for long. Strike, strike upon the pan, let mighty whiskers grow!’

And so I sat, covered with the blanket and the dome on my head, thinking, ‘It will be well since they take such pains. May the florin serve them well.’ When they had finished, the one who had beaten on the dome said, ‘Do not uncover thyself until we have gone, for if thou shouldst see us the moustache would flee after us; thus it will not, for they will not know where we went.’ So I stayed an hour more. In ill time, I uncovered and felt beneath my nose – there was no trace of a moustache. I looked about me, and there was neither meat nor bacon. That had been the beef and a little bacon that hung to cure on the rafters. For that I went there, to reclaim my meat, and but for you I had almost come to harm. Now I know not what to do.”

When I heard Cósó’s story, I answered, “Nothing for it – only if thou hast an egg, take it and give it them to peck at that bacon.”

The Millers Without Water

In a hamlet where no mill stood, the peasants were forced to bear their grain to a distant village to have it ground. Wearied at last, they gathered one day to deliberate what should be done. The village chieftain spake:

– Come, brethren, let us build a mill of our own, that we may no longer toil bearing our grain afar. Let it be for all alike, and let each partake of that which it shall yield. To serve all fairly, 'tis best we set it upon the very heart of the village.

Glad of heart at his counsel, the peasants all agreed and set themselves to work with diligence: they fetched clay and stone, ordered the upper and lower millstones, gathered timber to roof the mill, and swiftly completed the building atop a slight rise in the centre of the village. When the master builder was paid, each household brought a load of grain, and the chieftain said:

– Come now, children, in God's name, lift the sluice that the water may flow. I shall be the first to pour in my grain that it may be ground.

The peasants ran to lift the sluice, yet no water came.

– Good sir, our chieftain, there is not a drop in the sluice! Whence shall we draw the water?

– Ah, how ever is a poor man wanting in some wit! – quoth he. – Brethren, truth to tell, I never gave thought to the water!

Two Peasants at a Saint's Day

Two peasants went to town to sell some grain. When they arrived, weary and hungry, they noticed before a tavern tables laden with all manner of meats, cheeses, and other viands. Both thought that the innkeeper was celebrating his saint's day, and began hailing him with good wishes for his feast, that it might ever bring him happiness and delight. Then they seated themselves before a roasted lamb and began to eat.

The innkeeper, believing that the two were celebrating something, brought them wine. After each had drained two glasses, he set before them a jug. They then began to see who could drink the most. One of them lifted the jug and toasted:

– Health to you, brother host! May you ever celebrate your saint's day, and may it ever bring willing and unwilling guests to your honest house, leaving bountiful blessings behind! Good health to you, and thanks for the honour and your kindness! He who shows honour shall himself be honoured, God willing!

Thus they drank and feasted until they were full, when at last the innkeeper came and told them how much they must pay for the meal. The two peasants looked at each other, and one said:

– By my troth, this host is strange; he celebrates a feast yet charges his guests. Perhaps he is deaf and did not hear my toast. Come now, Jovan, make a toast yourself, and speak louder than I!

– Nay, nay, – said the innkeeper, standing beside the table, – I am not deaf, but ye are mad! 'Tis not my saint's day today. Pay what I told you!

The peasants were confounded and asked one another:

– What shall we do now?

– 'Tis ill and twisted! Let us leave the horses with him until we bring the money and pay for this meal!

This Year Christmas Shall Not Come

A priest there was in a village, poor in learning, who could barely read and scarce even write his own name. He owned no book of holy days, but when fasting was to begin, he would place in his pocket as many beans as there were days till the holy day, and each morning he would cast one away. Thus he kept count of when the feast was to fall.

Before the Christmas fast, his wife, the presbytera, took his cassock to mend at the elbows. And finding the beans in the pocket, yet not knowing what they signified, she cast them out.

When the priest put on the mended cassock and thrust his hand into the pocket to reckon the beans, there was not one. Alarmed, he cried out:

- Who has muddled up my Christmas?
- God save thee! – exclaimed the presbytera. – Who could ever muddle up Christmas?
- But where are the beans from my pocket?

Not understanding their purpose, the wife went to the storehouse, scooped up half a handful from the sack, and gave them to him, saying:

- Here then, thy beans!

The priest, certain she had restored to him the very same beans, went on as ever, casting one out each morning. But a few days before Christmas, the villagers asked him before the church:

– Father, how many days remain till Christmas?

He thrust his hand into his pocket to count the beans, and found there more than forty. Amazed, he answered them:

– As it seemeth to me, this year Christmas shall not come!

Two Priests in One Village

In a hamlet, there served an aged and simple priest. In time, the folk perceived that he had all but forsaken his duties, for no longer did he christen, nor shrive sins, and even the Sunday liturgy had he wellnigh abandoned. So the villagers took counsel among themselves and wrote unto the bishop, saying that their priest had waxed too feeble with years and could no longer serve them in their need.

The bishop, being of a kindly will, sent unto them a younger priest, well learned and zealous. Yet when he came to the village and would have taken up the charge, the elder suffered him not so much as to peer into the church, much less to share in the parish's income. Then was the younger sorely chagrined, and pondered day and night how he might requite the elder's spite. Thus, on a particular Sunday, when the liturgy was ended and the old priest stepped forth from the church, the younger one met him at the door and made obeisance, bowing low in front of him and kissing his hand. He thus besought the elder priest:

– I pray thee, holy Father, grant me but a single hair from thy snowy and sacred beard, that I may wear it upon my breast ere ever I depart from this place.

The elder, wishing naught so much as to see the youth gone, let him pluck a hair. The young man kissed it, laid it in his bosom, and departed.

Now the people, who had seen and heard the matter, were much stirred. The village elder came forth, bowed himself, and besought the priest that he too might pluck a hair. The priest mused a while and then consented. But when the rest beheld it, they cried aloud:

– By heaven, Father, since thou hast given both the young priest and our elder a hair from thy holy beard, thou shalt grant us the like! For we are, as well as they, God's folk and not the children of the Devil!

And thereupon they rushed upon him all at once, each striving to be first, till they had nearly torn from his chin the whole of his beard.

The Lie and Its Jest

Two men sat at the same table in the tavern, sipping rakija and talking. The first said:

– Hast thou heard of that monstrous stalk of the greens that hath sprung up in our village?

– What greens? – replied the other. – Nay, I have heard naught.

– 'Tis a wonder of God, taller than any oak, thicker than any apple tree, and fuller of branches than the tallest fir. Beneath its shade the whole village may gather and lie at ease. All that which in the village feedeth on greens draws sustenance from it, and none can reckon how much it giveth, even shouldst thou dip a cup from the farthest sea.

The second man now began:

– And hast thou heard of that cauldron which we are building in our village?

– Nay, what cauldron?

– A cauldron, brother, a marvel among marvels! Within it shall be over ten thousand oka. From within shall seventy-seven most skilled tinsmiths craft it, and from without ninety and nine. And however wide it be, the smiths shall not behold one another. We only wonder where we shall place it, for in the village it shall not stand.

- By God, brother, what need have ye of such a cauldron?
- Truly, should the greens in our village grow as prodigious as thine,
'tis therein we shall boil them.

The Tsar and Adam's Seed

A tsar, accompanied by his retinue, once rode out to hunt in a mountain region. There he came upon an old man, chopping wood and weeping. Puzzled, the tsar reined in his horse and asked:

– What sorrow hath befallen thee, good old man, that thou weapest so?

– Your Highness, this very morn my father struck me for some offence I gave my grandfather, and I cannot stanch my tears.

The tsar, amazed to hear that both father and grandfather yet lived, wished to see them.

– Wouldst thou bring me to thy home? I give thee my royal word that I shall reconcile thee with both thy father and thy grandfather.

The old man rejoiced and led the tsar and his retinue to his house. When they arrived, the tsar bade the old man show him the grandfather and took a seat at the table to speak with him.

– Grandfather, how many years hast thou lived?

The grandfather looked askance through his long, grey brows that shadowed his eyes, and said:

– By my soul, friend, truly I know not! But see yonder, near our house, the priest, he will know.

- How can the priest know, unless it be recorded in the church books?
- Here we have no books, but he remembers, for he baptised me.
- Baptised! – exclaimed the tsar. – And the priest who baptised thee yet lives?
- Lives, thanks be to God!

Having reconciled the old man with his grandfather, the tsar hastened to see the priest. Arriving at his house, he found the door barred. He knocked, and a maid appeared at the window:

- What seek you?
- I would see the priest.
- Pray wait a while, for he cannot come. His mother lies at the point of death, and he prays for the saving of her soul.

“What sort of place is this, if God be witness, where folk endure so many years?!” thought the astonished tsar to himself. Returning to his palace, he proclaimed throughout the realm: “Whoever wishes to behold Adam’s seed, let him journey to such-and-such village!”

A Husband Among His Wife's Kindred

One winter, a young man, newly wed, set forth to visit his wife's kin, and ere he departed, the household counselled him to speak with all courtesy and mirth, to jest with manners, to eat but sparingly, and to comport himself with gentlemanly bearing. When he arrived at the kin's home, they welcomed him warmly. He was attentive, modest, and civil, choosing his words with care. They placed him beside his mother-in-law, who leaned oft toward him, inquiring after her daughter, her health, how well she fared, and whether the two of them dwelt in concord.

At last, a feast was laid, plentiful and varied, prepared in honour of their worthy son-in-law. He, now greatly hungry, was pressed by his wife's mother, who kept filling his platter with food. Yet remembering his household counsel to eat but little, he took but two or three morsels, restraining himself and proffering his fork. The kinswoman of the house urged him to partake more, yet in vain; he smiled and said he could eat no more than this, nor would he eat more at home. When she heard it, she was offended, for she had prepared such a rich repast for him. And so their daughter's husband remained hungry, gazing with longing upon the dainties upon the table.

The daughters-in-law, eager to serve their kinsman by marriage, thereupon prepared a bed for him, spread a blanket of softly carded

lamb's wool, and over it a large woollen cover to keep him warm. Yet he, wishing to display the refinement in which he had been trained, spake unto them:

– I shall cover myself with naught save this very shawl!

They looked upon him in astonishment, beseeching him to take cover, lest the fire in the hearth burn low and the night prove cold, but all their entreaties were in vain. So all the household lay down to rest, and he remained beneath his single shawl.

At midnight, hungry and chilled, he rose quietly, so as not to awaken the household, and stole to the kitchen to partake of the remnants of the feast. But fortune forsook him, for Rundov, the watchful hound, who slumbered in a corner, leapt forth, growling, to seize him.

– What's this? What art thou that growlest, misfortune! – cried the father-in-law.

Frightened, yet unable to return to bed, the son-in-law scrambled through the doorway, fleeing the enraged hound. The household awoke and rose to see what was amiss, when one of the daughters-in-law, gazing through the moonlit window, exclaimed:

– Behold! Someone runs across the fields – surely a thief!

The Three Robbers

A peasant once set out for the market to sell a goat. He rode upon his horse, and the goat, with a bell about her neck, he fastened to the horse's tail. As he passed by a forest, three robbers espied him, and, observing him closely, began to confer how they might steal from him.

The first said:

– I would fain steal the goat, and he shall never know!

The second said:

– I would carry off his horse as well!

The third said:

– That is but a small matter. I would purloin even the garments he wears!

Thus, the first robber bided his time until the peasant had passed, then quietly leapt onto the path, untied the goat from the horse, removed the bell from her neck, and fastened it to the horse's tail. The peasant hearkened to the bell, and heedless, rode on, humming merrily. Yet when he came to a place where the road bent sharply, he looked about and found the goat gone. He returned to seek her, peering this way and that in hopes of finding both goat and the robber, when the second robber appeared and said:

– What seekest thou, friend?

– Alas! Some knave has stolen my goat! Hast thou perchance seen anyone leading her this way?

– Just now one passed, taking the goat into the thick wood. Make haste, and thou mayst overtake him!

The peasant dismounted, for he could not ride through the forest, and said to the robber:

– Pray, if thou art not in haste, keep my horse until I regain the goat!

The robber took the reins, and the peasant went into the forest. He wandered here and there, but found no one, and weary, returned to the road. Lo! at that very spot, neither horse nor goat remained, and he sat upon a stone, wretched, and wailed.

Then came the third robber and spake:

– What aileth thee, man, that thou weepest so?

– I am undone by robbers, and therefore I wail! First, they stole my goat, and to the one I entrusted my horse, now I have neither!

– Weep not, for on the morrow thou mayst have even more than one goat and one horse. Lo! I myself this morn suffered misfortune. I found a great nugget of gold high in the mountains and meant to carry it home; yet as I waded a stream, the nugget fell into a deep pool and sank, and I know not how to dive. Were there one who could, I would grant him half the nugget!

The peasant, hearing this, said:

– I know how to dive. Where lieth it?

The robber led him to a stream in which lay a deep whirlpool and said:

– Here, behold, is where the nugget fell.

The peasant stripped off all his garments and leapt into the pool. The robber carried off his clothes into the forest. When he emerged from the water, having found naught, the peasant beheld that he had lost his raiment, and there he sat, naked and forsaken, wailing again.

They Denied Him Entry

A certain thief set out to pilfer, and as evening drew near, he came upon a house. Since no light shone from the windows, he crept close to peer inside. While peering into the dim chamber, where even the hearthfire burned low, he discerned voices and the household gathered about the table, taking their supper in the dark. Seizing the chance, he crept on tiptoe into the house, found the stairs in the gloom, and slowly climbed to the loft. There he spread the sack he had brought and filled it with bacon, meat, sausages, and all manner of provisions, until it was heaped from loop to loop. He hoisted the laden sack upon his shoulders, and scarce had he taken a step when his foot slipped upon the beam, and down he tumbled, sack and all, crashing by the door.

– Hah! Good evening, good folk! – he called, as if he had merely entered.

They turned from the table and answered,

– Good fortune to thee! Who art thou?

– Woeful and ill-fated am I, yet would ye grant me lodging? I have sought it through the village, but none will receive me. The night is so dark I cannot see my hand before me, and this wretched alms, which people give me for the grace of God and the sake of their souls, weighs heavily on me. I beseech ye, aid me.

– We cannot, by God, – replied the master of the house. – Thou hast naught with which to cover thyself, nor to spread for thy bed; seek elsewhere where better fortune may lie.

– Alas, friend, I cannot wander through this village and ask for naught but a little shelter overhead.

– We cannot, in any wise; farewell!

– Then be it so. Only I pray that some hand help me lift this sack, that I may go and seek my doom elsewhere.

Then a daughter-in-law rose from the table, helped him to hoist the sack heavy with provisions, and he shouldered it and departed.

The following day, she climbed to the loft to fetch some bacon for the meal, only to find that every morsel had vanished.

– Alas! Alas! All our bacon and meat are gone!

The household gathered, and seeing her, they said:

– Thou, poor wretch, didst lift that thief's burden upon thy back last night!

Kum Steals a Piglet from His Kum

A peasant came to his kum, his ritual kinsman, and said:

– Kum, this morning I slaughtered a little sow; forgive me, I meant the piglet, and it weighs eighty oka. Yet here's the trouble: I must divide it with my neighbour, for last year he bought it and gave it to me to raise in halves. But I had rather share it with thee, kum, only I know not how.

The kum replied:

– Nothing easier. On the morrow, go to thy neighbour and tell him that someone stole the slaughtered piglet from the hook.

So the peasant returned home and hung the piglet upon a hook in the yard. But that very night, when all creatures had sunk into slumber, the kum stole in, lifted the piglet from the hook, and carried it away. At dawn the peasant rose, and when he saw the piglet gone, he raised a cry and ran to his kum, the thief:

– Kum, someone stole my piglet in the night!

– Is it so, kum, is it so!

– What meanest thou “is it so”? If it were mine alone, God forgive it, but I must pay my neighbour his half!

– Is it so, kum, is it so!

– Dost thou not hear me, man? My piglet is stolen! Advise me, for God's sake, what am I to do?

– Is it so, kum, is it so!

– Why repeatest thou only “is it so, kum”?

– Truly, I was listening to thee lie so handsomely, and for that reason I said, “Is it so, kum!” Say that to thy neighbour as well.

– Nay, my kum, by our very bond of kumstvo, our lifelong kinship, I lie not – I tell thee truth, someone truly stole my piglet last night! What shall I do now? It is neither mine, nor my neighbour's, nor thine.

– Is it so, kum, is it so! Aye, if thou art so cunning to cheat thy neighbour, I will not claim my share of it.

The True Oath

Two true-hearted and inseparable friends once lived together in a small country place. One summer, when the grapes in the priest's vineyard had ripened, the two agreed to steal some, not because they were thieves by nature, but more out of mere mischief, to vex the priest, who was a strict and petty man. They pondered how best to do it and decided that one would carry the other upon his back through the vineyard, while the one above would pluck the fruit.

The next day, having eaten their fill of the juicy grapes, they could not rest easy but lingered near the priest's land, eager to see him fume. When the priest, furious at the sight of the stripped vines, spied them from afar, he cried out:

– Who has taken my grapes?

They smiled, and one replied:

– Why ask us, Father? We took nothing of yours.

– I know not whether you did or didn't, – said the priest, – but you look mighty suspicious to me!

– If you doubt us, – said one, – the church is right there, and we'll swear before God Himself that we didn't touch your grapes.

– Ha! Look at your mouths, purple from my vines! You'll not swear to me, we'll go before the village elder!

That day was a saint's day, and after serving the liturgy, the priest hastened to the village elder, summoning the two as well. They denied all they could, but the priest would not believe them.

Then one of the men feigned anger and said:

– If thou trust us not, Father, as we said, we shall take the oath before the altar, God being our witness, and let it lie upon thy soul!

– I want no oaths! – barked the priest. – You are guilty, and that's the end of it!

– No, no, let them swear, – said the elder. And so, with witnesses, they all went to the church.

Before the gathered villagers, the first man, the one who had carried his friend, took up the cross and swore:

– May God strike me down, if last night I plucked even a single grape in that vineyard, may I never again gather grapes with my own hands!

Then he turned to the priest:

– Am I now without sin, Father?

– Indeed you are, – said the priest.

Then the second man, the one who had been carried, took the cross and said:

– May God and the Holy Virgin be my witnesses, if I so much as set one foot in that vineyard, may I never own vineyard nor know fortune in this life!

The priest was astonished, but had no choice but to admit he had wronged the young fellows.

– Ah, may all be forgiven you — of God and of mine own soul — since ye have sworn so dreadful an oath! By my faith, I am heartily sorry that ever I held doubt against you. I knew ye would speak truth before the Holy Cross; for had ye been guilty, ye would never have dared to swear so fearfully.

Ćoso and the Priest's Wife

Ćoso set out on foot for town, hoping to find some work, but night overtook him on the road. Looking for shelter, as the village had already sunk into sleep, he came upon a church and the priest's house beside it. He knocked on the door, and a woman's voice called out:

– Who's there?

– A traveller, chilled to the bone.

– What do you want?

– Nothing but a little straw beneath my back and a roof above my head till morning.

– I can't take you in, – said she. – My husband's away, making his rounds through the parish. Go on your way, and God be with you.

Ćoso stood thinking where he might go and what to do. Then thunder rolled, and rain began to pour. So he climbed up under the eaves of the house, tucking himself beneath the thatched roof. From there, he could see and hear all that went on inside. He watched as the woman busied herself about the room, laying out food and tending the fire, until the warmth reached even him in his hiding place. Soon, there came a knock at the door. She opened it and leapt into the arms of a man, who carried her to the bed – where they did what they wished – and then sat down to supper. The smell of roasted meat and fresh bread filled the air, and poor Ćoso, half-starved, watched hungrily

from above. They had not eaten long when someone else knocked hard at the door.

– Who's that now knocking on my door? – cried the woman, jumping up in alarm.

– It's me! Open up, I'm soaked to the skin!

She knew at once it was her husband, the priest. In a panic, she began hiding what she had prepared: meat in one corner, bread in another, the wine in a third, and the eggs she pushed into the ashes of the hearth. The lover, having nowhere else to go, crawled under the bed. Then, feigning drowsiness, she called,

– Wait, let me put on my dress! What brings you home now? You said you'd stay the night away!

– Enough talk, open the door! – he barked.

When he came in and sat by the fire to warm himself, he asked,

– Wife, have you anything to eat? I'm starving.

– Truly, there's nothing, but I'll cook something for you, – she said.

While the priest's wife busied herself with the dinner at the hearth, Óso slipped down from the roof, knocked on the door, and was welcomed in to spend the night.

Óso sat himself by the fire to warm, and the priest, after asking whence he came and whither he was bound, said:

– You seem to have seen much of the world, stranger. Tell us a story – something worth hearing!

Óso thought a moment and said:

– Well, I can tell you of the time I met a wolf up in the mountains when I was herding sheep.

– Go on, then! – said the priest.

– Now, here's how it happened, – said Cósó. – I was tending my flock one autumn when a wolf came charging straight at me. I had no weapon, so I grabbed a flat stone, just like that loaf over there! – He pointed toward the shelf, and the priest rose and found the loaf.

– I struck the beast in the ribs, and then I seized a round stone, just like that egg there! – He went and dug it out of the ashes. – Then I took up a heavier rock, one as big as that pot of stewed meat! – The priest fetched the pot. – And when I struck the wolf, blood gushed from him, red as the wine in that bottle! – The wine was found, too. – The wolf rolled over, bared his teeth – aye, just like *that* one lying under the bed!

The priest stooped, looked beneath the bed, and there lay a man. He dragged him out and gave him the beating of his life. He beat him till his own soul was satisfied, then drove both him and his wife away. As for Cósó, the priest not only let him stay the night but welcomed him as a brother and shared with him all he owned.

The Foolish Husband and the Cunning Wife

One winter, a certain woman arranged with her lover to come at the hour when she knew her husband would be away, that she might set about to brew him some cicvara. Should her husband, by chance, remain at home, she told the lover to look at the window, and if he saw a white kerchief there, he was not by any chance to come to the door, but hide in the shed and wait. The lover came at the appointed time, but that day a fierce north wind blew, and the husband would not stir from the house.

– Why don't you go, dear? Pavle will be angered if you do not repay him today!

– I cannot go in such a blizzard!

Seeing that she could not drive her husband out, and being heavy with child, the woman suddenly fell to the floor, clutching her belly and wailing:

– Oh, woe is me! My belly pains me sorely, I fear I shall miscarry this child!

– What are you saying, poor soul! – cried the husband, leaping to lift her from the ground. But she moaned:

– Unless you bring me the tender heart of a beech tree, I shall lose the child!

– Heaven help us, woman! Where am I to find the heart of beechwood in midwinter?

– Ah, my good man, had you more feeling, you'd go and light a fire round a beech, the heartwood would come forth soon enough!

Fearing that all she spake was truth, the poor fool took his tinderbox and went to light a fire round a great beech. He waited and waited, yet of naught did he find aught. Frozen to the bone, he at last returned home and declared to his wife that her wish was impossible. And she, faintly, replied:

– Ah, praise be to God, the pain has eased me now!

The Shepherd of Wit

There once was a poor man who set out into the wide world to earn his living. On his first night's road, he came to an inn, where the innkeeper's wife fried him two eggs for supper. Come morning, when it was time to pay, he had coin enough for his night lodging, yet none for the meal. So he promised the woman that once he returned from his travels, he'd repay her what he owed. She saw his threadbare coat and his hollow cheeks and thought to herself: "Two eggs aren't much, even if I'd fried them for the devil himself. He'll always be poor, this wretch, so let it be forgiven."

Years went by, ten of them, and the poor man laboured hard and grew wealthy. At length, he resolved to return home, buy a bit of land, and build himself a house. On the road back, he came again to that same inn. He paid the innkeeper's wife for his lodging and his supper, then laid down two groats more, saying:

– I know not if you remember, but ten years ago I owed you for a supper, two fried eggs, to be exact.

The woman peered at him closely. He was well clad now, hardly the beggar she once had seen.

– Yes, indeed, now I remember, – she said at last. – But hear me, we'll not settle the debt of yours without the judge.

The man marvelled at such talk, yet had no choice, and so they went before the court. When the hearing began, the innkeeper's wife stepped forward, straightened herself, and declared:

– This man ate at my inn ten years past, two fried eggs, and went his way without paying, though he swore to do so upon his return. Now he has come again, and I demand that those two eggs be reckoned as two hens, and that account be made of how many chickens might have hatched from them in ten years' time!

The clerks did their counting, and it came to several hundred thousand groats. The judge nodded solemnly and ruled that the traveller must bring that sum upon the morrow.

Stunned and heavy of heart, the man left the court and wandered down a path into the woods. As he walked, he heard the sound of a shepherd's flute. Soon, he came upon a flock of sheep and a young shepherd sitting on a rock, playing. Seeing the traveller's sorrow, the lad said:

– Why so woebegone, god sir? – asked the boy.

– Ah, – said the man, – no one but God himself could help me now.

– Tell me your trouble, – said the shepherd. – Perchance I may help thee yet.

The desperate man sat down beside the shepherd and told him all, how ten years before he had gone out into the world with nothing, and how fortune had smiled upon him. Then he told of the supper in the inn, and of the judgment that bade him pay away all he had earned.

– Dost thou see this pipe of mine?

– I do.

– If I teach thee how to win thy case to-morrow, wilt thou have one made for me, just like this but all of silver?

– That I will, – said the man.

– Good then, – said the lad. – Sit here with me and keep the flock until I bid thee go. When the hour comes, I'll tell thee what to say before the judge.

So the man tarried with him by the flock until it was nearly too late to reach the town. Then the shepherd sent him off, saying:

– Go now, and speak as I have taught thee.

When the man entered the courtroom, all were already gathered, and the judge frowned upon him, scolding him for being late. The traveller bowed low and said:

– Forgive me, Your Honour, I was hindered, boiling some seed before planting it in my garden.

Startled, the judge stared and said:

– Whoever told you boiled seed can grow and bear fruit?

– Why, Your Honour, I heard a judgment but yesterday that for two fried eggs I must pay hundreds of thousands of groats, for in ten years they might have bred a thousand hens. By such reckoning, methinks my boiled seed may yet yield me a fair harvest of corn.

At that, the judge burst out laughing and declared that he should pay to the innkeeper two groats for the two eggs and nothing more. And so it was – the shepherd received his flute of silver.

The Peasant and the Prophet

A certain man was walking along the road when he came upon a peasant who had clambered atop a beech tree and was sawing the branch on which he sat. The man cried:

– Friend, what are you about? Sit upon the other side, or both you and the branch will fall to the ground!

– By my soul, you would not deceive me, so go your own way! – replied the peasant.

No sooner had the man gone than the branch gave way, and the peasant fell to the earth, exclaiming to himself: “By my soul, that man is indeed a true prophet!” He ran after him, calling out:

– Thou art the prophet who knows all! I pray thee, tell me, by my soul, when shall I die?

– Not until thy pack-ass brays for the third time! – answered the traveller.

The peasant loaded his beast with firewood and hastened home. When the ass espied a she-donkey in a meadow, it brayed, and the peasant, afeared, bound a muzzle about its mouth that it should not bray again. Yet he drew it so tightly that the poor ass could scarcely draw breath, and after a few steps it collapsed and died.

Seeing the lifeless ass, the peasant untied the harness, lashed the logs together, and bore the firewood home himself, murmuring:

– Better to bear the wood thus, and mourn the perished ass, than to have it bray two more times!

From Evil to Woe

A father sent his foolish son to the mill to grind some grain, and warned him to take care that the miller would not take more than his due, no more than five oka per load, and to remember this well.

The boy set out with his laden donkey, and so that he would not forget his father's words, he repeated them aloud along the road: "Five oka per load, five oka per load..." As he went, he passed a man sowing wheat. When the man heard what the boy was saying, he thought him cursing, and said:

- Not so! May evil take thee!
- How then if not so? – replied the boy.
- From one, may three hundred come upon thee!

The boy continued on, repeating loudly what the man had said, and soon he came upon a funeral procession moving along the road behind a coffin. When they heard him say, "From one, may three hundred come upon thee," they cried out:

- Not so! May evil find thee!
- How then if not so?
- That happened now, may it never happen again!

The boy went on, repeating these words, until he met a wedding procession leading a bride. When they heard him say, "That happened now, may it never happen again," they shouted:

- Not so! Thy tongue is unbridled!
- How then if not so, pray tell me if God be witness?
- May she bear thee a son next year!

He continued along the road, repeating this, until he came to a man turning a pig on the spit. When the man heard him say, "May she bear thee a son next year," he shouted:

- Not so! May her mother bear thee, vile wretch!
- If not so, how shall I do then? – asked the boy.
- By that, may thy beard be fat!

Thus speaking, he came upon a man driving dung on horseback. When the man heard him say, "By that, may thy beard be fat," he seized a rod and struck him as one would a sack.

The boy returned home, beaten and bruised, and said to his father, weeping:

- Father, thou knewest what a devilish world it is, so why didst thou send me forth?

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