



Little Master Misery

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Russian

Easy

26 min read

Once upon a time there were two brothers, peasants, and one was kind and the other was cunning. And the cunning one made money and became rich—very rich—so rich that he thought himself far too good for the village. He went off to the town, and dressed in fine furs, and clothed his wife in rich brocades, and made friends among the merchants, and began to live as merchants live, eating all day long, no longer like a simple peasant who eats kasha one day, kasha the next day, and for a change kasha on the third day also. And always he grew richer and richer.

It was very different with the kind one. He lent money to a neighbour, and the neighbour never paid it back. He sowed before the last frost, and lost all his crops. His horse went lame. His cow gave no milk. If his hens laid eggs, they were stolen; and if he set a night-line in the river, some one else always pulled it out and stole the fish and the hooks. Everything went wrong with him, and each day saw him poorer than the day before. At last there came a time when he had not a crumb of bread in the house. He and his wife were thin as sticks because they had nothing to eat, and the children were crying all day long because of their little empty stomachs. From morning till night he dug and worked, struggling against poverty like a fish against the ice; but it was no good. Things went from bad to worse.

At last his wife said to him: “You must go to the town and see that rich brother of yours. He will surely not refuse to give you a little help.”

And he said: "Truly, wife, there is nothing else to be done. I will go to the town, and perhaps my rich brother will help me. I am sure he would not let my children starve. After all, he is their uncle."

So he took his stick and tramped off to the town.

He came to the house of his rich brother. A fine house it was, with painted eaves and a doorway carved by a master. Many servants were there and food in plenty, and people coming and going. He went in and found his brother, and said,—

"Dear brother of mine, I beg you help me, even if only a little. My wife and children are without bread. All day long they sit hungry and waiting, and I have no food to give them."

The rich brother looks at him, and hums and strokes his beard. Then says he: "I will help you. But, of course, you must do something in return. Stay here and work for me, and at the end of a week you shall have the help you have earned."

The poor brother thanked him, and bowed and kissed his hand, and praised God for the kindness of his brother's heart, and set instantly to work. For a whole week he slaved, and scarcely slept. He cleaned out the stables and cut the wood, swept the yard, drew water from the well, and ran errands for the cook. And at the end of the week his brother called him, and gave him a single loaf of bread.

"You must not forget," says the rich brother, "that I have fed you all the week you have been here, and all that food counts in the payment."

The poor brother thanked him, and was setting off to carry the loaf to his wife and children when the rich brother called him back.

"Stop a minute," said he; "I would like you to know that I am well disposed towards you. To-morrow is my name-day. Come to the feast, and bring your wife with you."

"How can I do that, brother? Your friends are rich merchants, with fine clothes, and boots on their feet. And I have nothing but my old coat, and my legs are bound in rags and my feet shuffle along in straw slippers. I do not want to shame you before your guests."

“Never mind about that,” says the rich brother; “we will find a place for you.”

“Very good, brother, and thank you kindly. God be praised for having given you a tender heart.”

And the poor brother, though he was tired out after all the work he had done, set off home as fast as he could to take the bread to his wife and children.

“He might have given you more than that,” said his wife.

“But listen,” said he; “what do you think of this? To-morrow we are invited, you and I, as guests, to go to a great feast.”

“What do you mean? A feast? Who has invited us?”

“My brother has invited us. To-morrow is his name-day. I always told you he had a kind heart. We shall be well fed, and I dare say we shall be able to bring back something for the children.”

“A pleasure like that does not often come our way,” said his wife.

So early in the morning they got up, and walked all the way to the town, so as not to shame the rich brother by putting up their old cart in the yard beside the merchants’ fine carriages. They came to the rich brother’s house, and found the guests all assembled and making merry; rich merchants and their plump wives, all eating and laughing and drinking and talking.

They wished a long life to the rich brother, and the poor brother wanted to make a speech, congratulating him on his name-day. But the rich brother scarcely thanked him, because he was so busy entertaining the rich merchants and their plump, laughing wives. He was pressing food on his guests, now this, now that, and calling to the servants to keep their glasses filled and their plates full of all the tastiest kinds of food. As for the poor brother and his wife, the rich one forgot all about them, and they got nothing to eat and never a drop to drink. They just sat there with empty plates and empty glasses, watching how the others ate and drank. The poor brother laughed with the rest, because he did not wish to show that he had been forgotten.

The dinner came to an end. One by one the guests went up to the giver of the feast to thank him for his good cheer. And the poor brother too got up from the bench, and bowed low before his brother and thanked him.

The guests went home, drunken and joyful. A fine noise they made, as people do on these occasions, shouting

jokes to each other and singing songs at the top of their voices.

The poor brother and his wife went home empty and sad. All that long way they had walked, and now they had to walk it again, and the feast was over, and never a bite had they had in their mouths, nor a drop in their gullets.

“Come, wife,” says the poor brother as he trudged along, “let us sing a song like the others.”

“What a fool you are!” says his wife. Hungry and cross she was, as even Maroosia would be after a day like that watching other people stuff themselves. “What a fool you are!” says she. “People may very well sing when they have eaten tasty dishes and drunk good wine. But what reason have you got for making a merry noise in the night?”

“Why, my dear” says he, “we have been at my brother’s name-day feast. I am ashamed to go home without a song. I’ll sing. I’ll sing so that everyone shall think he loaded us with good things like the rest.”

“Well, sing if you like; but you’ll sing by yourself.”

So the peasant, the poor brother, started singing a song with his dry throat. He lifted his voice and sang like the rest, while his wife trudged silently beside him.

But as he sang it seemed to the peasant that he heard two voices singing—his own and another’s. He stopped, and asked his wife,—

“Is that you joining in my song with a little thin voice?”

“What’s the matter with you? I never thought of singing with you. I never opened my mouth.”

“Who is it then?”

“No one except yourself. Any one would say you had had a drink of wine after all.”

“But I heard some one ... a little weak voice ... a little sad voice ... joining with mine.”

“I heard nothing,” said his wife; “but sing again, and I’ll listen.”

The poor man sang again. He sang alone. His wife listened, and it was clear that there were two voices singing—the dry voice of the poor man, and a little miserable voice that came from the shadows under the

trees. The poor man stopped, and asked out loud,—

“Who are you who are singing with me?”

And a little thin voice answered out of the shadows by the roadside, under the trees,—

“I am Misery.”

“So it was you, Misery, who were helping me?”

“Yes, master, I was helping you.”

“Well, little Master Misery, come along with us and keep us company.”

“I’ll do that willingly,” says little Master Misery, “and I’ll never, never leave you at all—no, not if you have no other friend in the world.”

And a wretched little man, with a miserable face and little thin legs and arms, came out of the shadows and went home with the peasant and his wife.

It was late when they got home, but little Master Misery asked the peasant to take him to the tavern. “After such a day as this has been,” says he, “there’s nothing else to be done.”

“But I have no money,” says the peasant.

“What of that?” says little Master Misery. “Spring has begun, and you have a winter jacket on. It will soon be summer, and whether you have it or not you won’t wear it. Bring it along to the tavern, and change it for a drink.”

The poor man went to the tavern with little Master Misery, and they sat there and drank the vodka that the tavern-keeper gave them in exchange for the coat.

Next day, early in the morning, little Master Misery began complaining. His head ached and he could not open his eyes, and he did not like the weather, and the children were crying, and there was no food in the house. He asked the peasant to come with him to the tavern again and forget all this wretchedness in a drink.

“But I’ve got no money,” says the peasant.

“Rubbish!” says little Master Misery; “you have a sledge and a cart.”

They took the cart and the sledge to the tavern, and stayed there drinking until the tavern-keeper said they had had all that the cart and the sledge were worth. Then the tavern-keeper took them and threw them out of doors into the night, and they picked themselves up and crawled home.

Next day Misery complained worse than before, and begged the peasant to come with him to the tavern. There was no getting rid of him, no keeping him quiet. The peasant sold his barrow and plough, so that he could no longer work his land. He went to the tavern with little Master Misery.

A month went by like that, and at the end of it the peasant had nothing left at all. He had even pledged the hut he lived in to a neighbour, and taken the money to the tavern.

And every day little Master Misery begged him to come. “There I am not wretched any longer,” says Misery. “There I sing, and even dance, hitting the floor with my heels and making a merry noise.”

“But now I have no money at all, and nothing left to sell,” says the poor peasant. “I’d be willing enough to go with you, but I can’t, and here is an end of it.”

“Rubbish!” says Misery; “your wife has two dresses. Leave her one; she can’t wear both at once. Leave her one, and buy a drink with the other. They are both ragged, but take the better of the two. The tavern-keeper is a just man, and will give us more drink for the better one.”

The peasant took the dress and sold it; and Misery laughed and danced, while the peasant thought to himself, “Well, this is the end. I’ve nothing left to sell, and my wife has nothing either. We’ve the clothes on our backs, and nothing else in the world.”

In the morning little Master Misery woke with a headache as usual, and a mouthful of groans and complaints. But he saw that the peasant had nothing left to sell, and he called out,—

“Listen to me, master of the house.”

“What is it, Misery?” says the peasant, who was master of nothing in the world.

“Go you to a neighbour and beg the loan of a cart and a pair of good oxen.”

The poor peasant had no will of his own left. He did exactly as he was told. He went to his neighbour and begged the loan of the oxen and cart.

“But how will you repay me?” says the neighbour.

“I will do a week’s work for you for nothing.”

“Very well,” says the neighbour; “take the oxen and cart, but be careful not to give them too heavy a load.”

“Indeed I won’t,” says the peasant, thinking to himself that he had nothing to load them with. “And thank you very much,” says he; and he goes back to Misery, taking with him the oxen and cart.

Misery looked at him and grumbled in his wretched little voice, “They are hardly strong enough,”

“They are the best I could borrow,” says the peasant; “and you and I have starved too long to be heavy.”

And the peasant and little Master Misery sat together in the cart and drove off together, Misery holding his head in both hands and groaning at the jolt of the cart.

As soon as they had left the village, Misery sat up and asked the peasant,—

“Do you know the big stone that stands alone in the middle of a field not far from here?”

“Of course I know it,” says the peasant.

“Drive straight to it,” says Misery, and went on rocking himself to and fro, and groaning and complaining in his wretched little voice.

They came to the stone, and got down from the cart and looked at the stone. It was very big and heavy, and was fixed in the ground.

“Heave it up,” says Misery.

The poor peasant set to work to heave it up, and Misery helped him, groaning, and complaining that the peasant was nothing of a fellow because he could not do his work by himself. Well, they heaved it up, and there below it was a deep hole, and the hole was filled with gold pieces to the very top; more gold pieces than ever you will see copper ones if you live to be a hundred and ten.

“Well, what are you staring at?” says Misery. “Stir yourself, and be quick about it, and load all this gold into the cart.”

The peasant set to work, and piled all the gold into the cart down to the very last gold piece; while Misery sat on the stone and watched, groaning and chuckling in his weak, wretched little voice.

“Be quick,” says Misery; “and then we can get back to the tavern.”

The peasant looked into the pit to see that there was nothing left there, and then says he,—

“Just take a look, little Master Misery, and see that we have left nothing behind. You are smaller than I, and can get right down into the pit....”

Misery slipped down from the stone, grumbling at the peasant, and bent over the pit.

“You’ve taken the lot,” says he; “there’s nothing to be seen.”

“But what is that,” says the peasant—“there, shining in the corner?”

“I don’t see it.”

“Jump down into the pit and you’ll see it. It would be a pity to waste a gold piece.”

Misery jumped down into the pit, and instantly the peasant rolled the stone over the hole and shut him in.

“Things will be better so,” says the peasant. “If I were to let you out of that, sooner or later you would drink up all this money, just as you drank up everything I had.”

Then the peasant drove home and hid the gold in the cellar; took the oxen and cart back to his neighbour, thanked him kindly, and began to think what he would do, now that Misery was his master no longer, and he with plenty of money.

“But he had to work for a week to pay for the loan of the oxen and cart,” said Vanya.

“Well, during the week, while he was working, he was thinking all the time, in his head,” said old Peter, a little grumpily. Then he went on with his tale.

As soon as the week was over, he bought a forest and built himself a fine house, and began to live twice as richly as his brother in the town. And his wife had two new dresses, perhaps more; with a lot of gold and silver braid, and necklaces of big yellow stones, and bracelets and sparkling rings. His children were well fed every day—rivers of milk between banks of kisel jelly, and mushrooms with sauce, and soup, and cakes with little balls of egg and meat hidden in the middle. And they had toys that squeaked, a little boy feeding a goose that poked its head into a dish, and a painted hen with a lot of chickens that all squeaked together.

Time went on, and when his name-day drew near he thought of his brother, the merchant, and drove off to the town to invite him to take part in the feast.

“I have not forgotten, brother, that you invited me to yours.”

“What a fellow you are!” says his brother; “you have nothing to eat yourself, and here you are inviting other people for your name-day.”

“Yes,” said the peasant, “once upon a time, it is true, I had nothing to eat; but now, praise be to God, I am no poorer than yourself. Come to my name-day feast and you will see.”

“Very well,” says his brother, “I’ll come; but don’t think you can play any jokes on me.”

On the morning of the peasant’s name-day his brother, the merchant in the town, put on his best clothes, and his plump wife dressed in all her richest, and they got into their cart—a fine cart it was too, painted in the brightest colours—and off they drove together to the house of the brother who had once been poor. They took a basket of food with them, in case he had only been joking when he invited them to his name-day feast.

They drove to the village, and asked for him at the hut where he used to be.

An old man hobbling along the road answered them,—

“Oh, you mean our Ivan Ilyitch. Well, he does not live here any longer. Where have you been that you have not heard? His is the big new house on the hill. You can see it through the trees over there, where all these people

are walking. He has a kind heart, he has, and riches have not spoiled it. He has invited the whole village to feast with him, because to-day is his name-day.”

“Riches!” thought the merchant; “a new house!” He was very much surprised, but as he drove along the road he was more surprised still. For he passed all the villagers on their way to the feast; and every one was talking of his brother, and how kind he was and how generous, and what a feast there was going to be, and how many barrels of mead and wine had been taken up to the house. All the folk were hurrying along the road licking their lips, each one going faster than the other so as to be sure not to miss any of the good things.

The rich brother from the town drove with his wife into the courtyard of the fine new house. And there on the steps was the peasant brother, Ivan Ilyitch, and his wife, receiving their guests. And if the rich brother was well dressed, the peasant was better dressed; and if the rich brother’s wife was in her fine clothes, the peasant’s wife fairly glittered—what with the gold braid on her bosom and the shining silver in her hair.

And the peasant brother kissed his brother from the town on both cheeks, and gave him and his wife the best places at the table. He fed them—ah, how he fed them!—with little red slips of smoked salmon, and beetroot soup with cream, and slabs of sturgeon, and meats of three or four kinds, and game and sweetmeats of the best. There never was such a feast—no, not even at the wedding of a Tzar. And as for drink, there were red wine and white wine, and beer and mead in great barrels, and everywhere the peasant went about among his guests, filling glasses and seeing that their plates were kept piled with the foods each one liked best.

And the rich brother wondered and wondered, and at last he could wait no longer, and he took his brother aside and said,—

“I am delighted to see you so rich. But tell me, I beg you, how it was that all this good fortune came to you.”

The poor brother, never thinking, told him all—the whole truth about little Master Misery and the pit full of gold, and how Misery was shut in there under the big stone.

The merchant brother listened, and did not forget a word. He could hardly bear himself for envy, and as for his wife, she was worse. She looked at the peasant’s wife with her beautiful head-dress, and she bit her lips till they bled.

As soon as they could, they said good-bye and drove off home.

The merchant brother could not bear the thought that his brother was richer than he. He said to himself, "I will go to the field, and move the stone, and let Master Misery out. Then he will go and tear my brother to pieces for shutting him in; and his riches will not be of much use to him then, even if Misery does not give them to me as a token of gratitude. Think of my brother daring to show off his riches to me!"

So he drove off to the field, and came at last to the big stone. He moved the stone on one side, and then bent over the pit to see what was in it.

He had scarcely put his head over the edge before Misery sprang up out of the pit, seated himself firmly on his shoulders, squeezed his neck between his little wiry legs, and pulled out handfuls of his hair.

"Scream away!" cried little Master Misery. "You tried to kill me, shutting me up in there, while you went off and bought fine clothes. You tried to kill me, and came to feast your eyes on my corpse. Now, whatever happens, I'll never leave you again."

"Listen, Misery!" screamed the merchant. "Ai, ai! stop pulling my hair. You are choking me. Ai! Listen. It was not I who shut you in under the stone...."

"Who was it, if it was not you?" asked Misery, tugging out his hair, and digging his knees into the merchant's throat.

"It was my brother. I came here on purpose to let you out. I came out of pity."

Misery tugged the merchant's hair, and twisted the merchant's ears till they nearly came off.

"Liar, liar!" he shouted in his little, wretched, angry voice. "You tricked me once. Do you think you'll get the better of me again by a clumsy lie of that kind? Now then. Gee up! Home we go."

And so the rich brother went trotting home, crying with pain; while little Master Misery sat firmly on his shoulders, pulling at his hair.

Instantly Misery was at his old tricks.

"You seem to have bought a good deal with the gold," he said, looking at the merchant's house. "We'll see how far it will go." And every day he rode the rich merchant to the tavern, and made him drink up all his money, and his house, his clothes, his horses and carts and sledges—everything he had—until he was as poor as his brother

had been in the beginning.

The merchant thought and thought, and puzzled his brain to find a way to get rid of him. And at last one night, when Misery had groaned himself to sleep, the merchant went out into the yard and took a big cart wheel and made two stout wedges of wood, just big enough to fit into the hub of the wheel. He drove one wedge firmly in at one end of the hub, and left the wheel in the yard with the other wedge, and a big hammer lying handy close to it.

In the morning Misery wakes as usual, and cries out to be taken to the tavern.

“We’ve sold everything I’ve got,” says the merchant.

“Well, what are you going to do to amuse me?” says Misery.

“Let’s play hide-and-seek in the yard,” says the merchant.

“Right,” says Misery; “but you’ll never find me, for I can make myself so small I can hide in a mouse-hole in the floor.”

“We’ll see,” says the merchant.

The merchant hid first, and Misery found him at once.

“Now it’s my turn,” says Misery; “but what’s the good? You’ll never find me. Why, I could get inside the hub of that wheel if I had a mind to.”

“What a liar you are!” says the merchant; “you never could get into that little hole.”

“Look,” says Misery, and he made himself little, little, little, and sat on the hub of the wheel.

“Look,” says he, making himself smaller again; and then, pouf! in he pops into the hole of the hub.

Instantly the merchant took the other wedge and the hammer, and drove the wedge into the hole. The first wedge had closed up the other end, and so there was Misery shut up inside the hub of the cart wheel.

The merchant set the wheel on his shoulders, and took it to the river and threw it out as far as he could, and it went floating away down to the sea.

Then he went home and set to work to make money again, and earn his daily bread; for Misery had made him so poor that he had nothing left, and had to hire himself out to make a living, just as his peasant brother used to do.

But what happened to Misery when he went floating away?

He floated away down the river, shut up in the hub of the wheel. He ought to have starved there. But I am afraid some silly, greedy fellow thought to get a new wheel for nothing, and pulled the wedges out and let him go; for, by all I hear, Misery is still wandering about the world and making people wretched—bad luck to him!

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