

# *Oh: The Tsar of the Forest*

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Ukrainian

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*Intermediate*

*21 min read*

The olden times were not like the times we live in. In the olden times all manner of Evil Powers walked abroad. The world itself was not then as it is now: now there are no such Evil Powers among us. I'll tell you a kazka (story) of Oh, the Tsar of the Forest, that you may know what manner of being he was.



“All manner of evil powers walked abroad.” Illustration by Noel Laura Nisbet. Published in Cossack Fairy Tales. 1916. George Harap.

Once upon a time, long long ago, beyond the times that we can call to mind, ere yet our great-grandfathers or their grandfathers had been born into the world, there lived a poor man and his wife, and they had one only son, who was not as an only son ought to be to his old father and mother. So idle and lazy was that only son that Heaven help him! He would do nothing, he would not even fetch water from the well, but lay on the stove all day long and rolled among the warm cinders.

If they gave him anything to eat, he ate it; and if they didn't give him anything to eat, he did without. His father and mother fretted sorely because of him, and said, “What are we to do with thee, O son? for thou art good for nothing. Other people's children are a stay and a support to their parents, but thou art but a fool and dost consume our bread for naught.” But it was of no use at all. He would do nothing but sit on the stove and play with the cinders. So his father and mother grieved over him for many a long day, and at last his mother said to his father, “What is to be done with our son? Thou dost see that he has grown up and yet is of no use to us, and he is so foolish that we can do nothing with him. Look now, if we can send him away, let us send him away; if we can hire him out, let us hire him out; perchance other folk may be able to do more with him than we can.”

So his father and mother laid their heads together, and sent him to a tailor's to learn tailoring. There he remained three days, but then he ran away home, climbed up on the stove, and again began playing with the cinders. His father then gave him a sound drubbing and sent him to a cobbler's to learn cobbling, but again he ran away home. His father gave him another drubbing and sent him to a blacksmith to learn smith's work. But there too he did not remain long, but ran away home again, so what was that poor father to do? “I'll tell thee what I'll do with thee, thou son of a dog!” said he. “I'll take thee, thou lazy lout, into another kingdom. There, perchance, they will be able to teach thee better than they can here, and it will be too far for thee to run home.” So he took him and set out on his journey.

They went on and on, they went a short way and they went a long way, and at last they came to a forest so dark that they could see neither earth nor sky. They went through this forest, but in a short time they grew very tired, and when they came to a path leading to a clearing full of large tree-stumps, the father said, “I am so

tired out that I will rest here a little,” and with that he sat down on a tree-stump and cried, “Oh, how tired I am!” He had no sooner said these words than out of the tree-stump, nobody could say how, sprang such a little, little old man, all so wrinkled and puckered, and his beard was quite green and reached right down to his knee.--“What dost thou want of me, O man?” he asked.--The man was amazed at the strangeness of his coming to light, and said to him, “I did not call thee; begone!”--“How canst thou say that when thou didst call me?” asked the little old man.

--“Who art thou, then?” asked the father.--“I am Oh, the Tsar of the Woods,” replied the old man; “why didst thou call me, I say?”--“Away with thee, I did not call thee,” said the man.--“What! thou didst not call me when thou saidst ‘Oh?’”--“I was tired, and therefore I said ‘Oh!’” replied the man.--“Whither art thou going?” asked Oh.--“The wide world lies before me,” sighed the man. “I am taking this sorry blockhead of mine to hire him out to somebody or other. Perchance other people may be able to knock more sense into him than we can at home; but send him whither we will, he always comes running home again!”--“Hire him out to me. I’ll warrant I’ll teach him,” said Oh. “Yet I’ll only take him on one condition. Thou shalt come back for him when a year has run, and if thou dost know him again, thou mayst take him; but if thou dost not know him again, he shall serve another year with me.”--“Good!” cried the man. So they shook hands upon it, had a good drink to clinch the bargain, and the man went back to his own home, while Oh took the son away with him.

Oh took the son away with him, and they passed into the other world, the world beneath the earth, and came to a green hut woven out of rushes, and in this hut everything was green; the walls were green and the benches were green, and Oh’s wife was green and his children were green--in fact, everything there was green. And Oh had water-nixies for serving-maids, and they were all as green as rue. “Sit down now!” said Oh to his new labourer, “and have a bit of something to eat.” The nixies then brought him some food, and that also was green, and he ate of it. “And now,” said Oh, “take my labourer into the courtyard that he may chop wood and draw water.”

So they took him into the courtyard, but instead of chopping any wood he lay down and went to sleep. Oh came out to see how he was getting on, and there he lay a-snooring. Then Oh seized him, and bade them bring wood and tie his labourer fast to the wood, and set the wood on fire till the labourer was burnt to ashes. Then Oh took the ashes and scattered them to the four winds, but a single piece of burnt coal fell from out of the ashes, and this coal he sprinkled with living water, whereupon the labourer immediately stood there alive again and

somewhat handsomer and stronger than before. Oh again bade him chop wood, but again he went to sleep. Then Oh again tied him to the wood and burnt him and scattered the ashes to the four winds and sprinkled the remnant of the coal with living water, and instead of the loutish clown there stood there such a handsome and stalwart Cossack that the like of him can neither be imagined nor described but only told of in tales.

There, then, the lad remained for a year, and at the end of the year the father came for his son. He came to the self-same charred stumps in the self-same forest, sat him down, and said, "Oh!" Oh immediately came out of the charred stump and said, "Hail! O man!"--"Hail to thee, Oh!"--"And what dost thou want, O man?" asked Oh.--"I have come," said he, "for my son."--"Well, come then! If thou dost know him again, thou shalt take him away; but if thou dost not know him, he shall serve with me yet another year." So the man went with Oh. They came to his hut, and Oh took whole handfuls of millet and scattered it about, and myriads of cocks came running up and pecked it. "Well, dost thou know thy son again?" said Oh. The man stared and stared. There was nothing but cocks, and one cock was just like another. He could not pick out his son. "Well," said Oh, "as thou dost not know him, go home again; this year thy son must remain in my service." So the man went home again.

The second year passed away, and the man again went to Oh. He came to the charred stumps and said, "Oh!" and Oh popped out of the tree-stump again. "Come!" said he, "and see if thou canst recognize him now." Then he took him to a sheep-pen, and there were rows and rows of rams, and one ram was just like another. The man stared and stared, but he could not pick out his son. "Thou mayst as well go home then," said Oh, "but thy son shall live with me yet another year." So the man went away, sad at heart.

The third year also passed away, and the man came again to find Oh. He went on and on till there met him an old man all as white as milk, and the raiment of this old man was glistening white. "Hail to thee, O man!" said he.--"Hail to thee also, my father!"--"Whither doth God lead thee?"--"I am going to free my son from Oh."--"How so?"--Then the man told the old white father how he had hired out his son to Oh and under what conditions.--"Aye, aye!" said the old white father, "'tis a vile pagan thou hast to deal with; he will lead thee about by the nose for a long time."--"Yes," said the man, "I perceive that he is a vile pagan; but I know not what in the world to do with him. Canst thou not tell me then, dear father, how I may recover my son?"--"Yes, I can," said the old man.--"Then prythee tell me, darling father, and I'll pray for thee to God all my life, for though he has not been much of a son to me, he is still my own flesh and blood."--"Hearken, then!" said the

old man; “when thou dost go to Oh, he will let loose a multitude of doves before thee, but choose not one of these doves. The dove thou shalt choose must be the one that comes not out, but remains sitting beneath the pear-tree pruning its feathers; that will be thy son.” Then the man thanked the old white father and went on.

He came to the charred stumps. “Oh!” cried he, and out came Oh and led him to his sylvan realm. There Oh scattered about handfuls of wheat and called his doves, and there flew down such a multitude of them that there was no counting them, and one dove was just like another. “Dost thou recognize thy son?” asked Oh. “An thou knowest him again, he is thine; an thou knowest him not, he is mine.” Now all the doves there were pecking at the wheat, all but one that sat alone beneath the pear-tree, sticking out its breast and pruning its feathers. “That is my son,” said the man. -- “Since thou hast guessed him, take him,” replied Oh. Then the father took the dove, and immediately it changed into a handsome young man, and a handsomer was not to be found in the wide world. The father rejoiced greatly and embraced and kissed him. “Let us go home, my son!” said he. So they went.

As they went along the road together they fell a-talking, and his father asked him how he had fared at Oh’s. The son told him. Then the father told the son what he had suffered, and it was the son’s turn to listen.

Furthermore the father said, “What shall we do now, my son? I am poor and thou art poor: hast thou served these three years and earned nothing?” -- “Grieve not, dear dad, all will come right in the end. Look! there are some young nobles hunting after a fox. I will turn myself into a greyhound and catch the fox, then the young noblemen will want to buy me of thee, and thou must sell me to them for three hundred roubles -- only, mind thou sell me without a chain; then we shall have lots of money at home, and will live happily together!”

They went on and on, and there, on the borders of a forest, some hounds were chasing a fox. They chased it and chased it, but the fox kept on escaping, and the hounds could not run it down. Then the son changed himself into a greyhound, and ran down the fox and killed it. The noblemen thereupon came galloping out of the forest. “Is that thy greyhound?” -- “It is.” -- “Tis a good dog; wilt sell it to us?” -- “Bid for it!” -- “What dost thou require?” -- “Three hundred roubles without a chain.” -- “What do we want with thy chain, we would give him a chain of gold. Say a hundred roubles!” -- “Nay!” -- “Then take thy money and give us the dog.” They counted down the money and took the dog and set off hunting. They sent the dog after another fox. Away he went after it and chased it right into the forest, but then he turned into a youth again and rejoined his father.

They went on and on, and his father said to him, "What use is this money to us after all? It is barely enough to begin housekeeping with and repair our hut."--"Grieve not, dear dad, we shall get more still. Over yonder are some young noblemen hunting quails with falcons. I will change myself into a falcon, and thou must sell me to them; only sell me for three hundred roubles, and without a hood."

They went into the plain, and there were some young noblemen casting their falcon at a quail. The falcon pursued but always fell short of the quail, and the quail always eluded the falcon. The son then changed himself into a falcon and immediately struck down its prey. The young noblemen saw it and were astonished. "Is that thy falcon?"--"Tis mine."--"Sell it to us, then!"--"Bid for it!"--"What dost thou want for it?"--"If ye give three hundred roubles, ye may take it, but it must be without the hood."--"As if we want thy hood! We'll make for it a hood worthy of a Tsar." So they higgled and haggled, but at last they gave him the three hundred roubles. Then the young nobles sent the falcon after another quail, and it flew and flew till it beat down its prey; but then he became a youth again, and went on with his father.

"How shall we manage to live with so little?" said the father.--"Wait a while, dad, and we shall have still more," said the son. "When we pass through the fair I'll change myself into a horse, and thou must sell me. They will give thee a thousand roubles for me, only sell me without a halter." So when they got to the next little town, where they were holding a fair, the son changed himself into a horse, a horse as supple as a serpent, and so fiery that it was dangerous to approach him. The father led the horse along by the halter; it pranced about and struck sparks from the ground with its hoofs. Then the horse-dealers came together and began to bargain for it. "A thousand roubles down," said he, "and you may have it, but without the halter."--"What do we want with thy halter? We will make for it a silver-gilt halter. Come, we'll give thee five hundred!"--"No!" said he. Then up there came a gipsy, blind of one eye. "O man! what dost thou want for that horse?" said he.--"A thousand roubles without the halter."--"Nay! but that is dear, little father! Wilt thou not take five hundred with the halter?"--"No, not a bit of it!"--"Take six hundred, then!" Then the gipsy began higgling and haggling, but the man would not give way. "Come, sell it," said he, "with the halter."--"No, thou gipsy, I have a liking for that halter."--"But, my good man, when didst thou ever see them sell a horse without a halter? How then can one lead him off?"--"Nevertheless, the halter must remain mine."--"Look now, my father, I'll give thee five roubles extra, only I must have the halter."--The old man fell a-thinking. "A halter of this kind is worth but three grivni (coins) and the gipsy offers me five roubles for it; let him have it." So they clinched the bargain with

a good drink, and the old man went home with the money, and the gipsy walked off with the horse. But it was not really a gipsy, but Oh, who had taken the shape of a gipsy.

Then Oh rode off on the horse, and the horse carried him higher than the trees of the forest, but lower than the clouds of the sky. At last they sank down among the woods and came to Oh's hut, and Oh went into his hut and left his horse outside on the steppe. "This son of a dog shall not escape from my hands so quickly a second time," said he to his wife. At dawn Oh took the horse by the bridle and led it away to the river to water it. But no sooner did the horse get to the river and bend down its head to drink than it turned into a perch and began swimming away. Oh, without more ado, turned himself into a pike and pursued the perch. But just as the pike was almost up with it, the perch gave a sudden twist and stuck out its spiky fins and turned its tail toward the pike, so that the pike could not lay hold of it. So when the pike came up to it, it said, "Perch! perch! turn thy head toward me, I want to have a chat with thee!"—"I can hear thee very well as I am, dear cousin, if thou art inclined to chat," said the perch. So off they set again, and again the pike overtook the perch. "Perch! perch! turn thy head round toward me, I want to have a chat with thee!" Then the perch stuck out its bristly fins again and said, "If thou dost wish to have a chat, dear cousin, I can hear thee just as well as I am." So the pike kept on pursuing the perch, but it was of no use. At last the perch swam ashore, and there was a Tsarivna (a Tsar's daughter) whittling an ash twig. The perch changed itself into a gold ring set with garnets, and the Tsarivna saw it and fished up the ring out of the water. Full of joy she took it home, and said to her father, "Look, dear papa! what a nice ring I have found!" The Tsar kissed her, but the Tsarivna did not know which finger it would suit best, it was so lovely.

About the same time they told the Tsar that a certain merchant had come to the palace. It was Oh, who had changed himself into a merchant. The Tsar went out to him and said, "What dost thou want, old man?"—"I was sailing on the sea in my ship," said Oh, "and carrying to the Tsar of my own land a precious garnet ring, and this ring I dropped into the water. Has any of thy servants perchance found this precious ring?"—"No, but my daughter has," said the Tsar. So they called the damsel, and Oh began to beg her to give it back to him, "for I may not live in this world if I bring not the ring," said he. But it was of no avail, she would not give it up.

Then the Tsar himself spoke to her. "Nay, but, darling daughter, give it up, lest misfortune befall this man because of us; give it up, I say!" Then Oh begged and prayed her yet more, and said, "Take what thou wilt of me, only give me back the ring."—"Nay, then," said the Tsarivna, "it shall be neither mine nor thine," and with that

she tossed the ring upon the ground, and it turned into a heap of millet-seed and scattered all about the floor. Then Oh, without more ado, changed into a cock, and began pecking up all the seed. He pecked and pecked till he had pecked it all up. Yet there was one single little grain of millet which rolled right beneath the feet of the Tsarivna, and that he did not see. When he had done pecking he got upon the window-sill, opened his wings, and flew right away.

But the one remaining grain of millet-seed turned into a most beauteous youth, a youth so beauteous that when the Tsarivna beheld him she fell in love with him on the spot, and begged the Tsar and Tsaritsa right piteously to let her have him as her husband. "With no other shall I ever be happy," said she; "my happiness is in him alone!" For a long time the Tsar wrinkled his brows at the thought of giving his daughter to a simple youth; but at last he gave them his blessing, and they crowned them with bridal wreaths, and all the world was bidden to the wedding-feast. And I too was there, and drank beer and mead, and what my mouth could not hold ran down over my beard, and my heart rejoiced within me.

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