



# *The Tale of the Silver Saucer and the Transparent Apple*

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Russian

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*Intermediate*  
*25 min read*

There was once an old peasant, and he must have had more brains under his hair than ever I had, for he was a merchant, and used to take things every year to sell at the big fair of Nijni Novgorod. Well, I could never do that. I could never be anything better than an old forester.

“Never mind, grandfather,” said Maroosia.

God knows best, and He makes some merchants and some foresters, and some good and some bad, all in His own way. Anyhow this one was a merchant, and he had three daughters. They were none of them so bad to look at, but one of them was as pretty as Maroosia. And she was the best of them too. The others put all the hard work on her, while they did nothing but look at themselves in the looking-glass and complain of what they had to eat. They called the pretty one “Little Stupid,” because she was so good and did all their work for them. Oh, they were real bad ones, those two. We wouldn’t have them in here for a minute.

Well, the time came round for the merchant to pack up and go to the big fair. He called his daughters, and said, “Little pigeons,” just as I say to you. “Little pigeons,” says he, “what would you like me to bring you from

the fair?"

Says the eldest, "I'd like a necklace, but it must be a rich one."

Says the second, "I want a new dress with gold hems."

But the youngest, the good one, Little Stupid, said nothing at all.

"Now little one," says her father, "what is it you want? I must bring something for you too."

Says the little one, "Could I have a silver saucer and a transparent apple? But never mind if there are none."

The old merchant says, "Long hair, short sense," just as I say to Maroosia; but he promised the little pretty one, who was so good that her sisters called her stupid, that if he could get her a silver saucer and a transparent apple she should have them.

Then they all kissed each other, and he cracked his whip, and off he went, with the little bells jingling on the horses' harness.

The three sisters waited till he came back. The two elder ones looked in the looking-glass, and thought how fine they would look in the new necklace and the new dress; but the little pretty one took care of her old mother, and scrubbed and dusted and swept and cooked, and every day the other two said that the soup was burnt or the bread not properly baked.

Then one day there were a jingling of bells and a clattering of horses' hoofs, and the old merchant came driving back from the fair.

The sisters ran out.

"Where is the necklace?" asked the first.

"You haven't forgotten the dress?" asked the second.

But the little one, Little Stupid, helped her old father off with his coat, and asked him if he was tired.

"Well, little one," says the old merchant, "and don't you want your fairing too? I went from one end of the

market to the other before I could get what you wanted. I bought the silver saucer from an old Jew, and the transparent apple from a Finnish hag.”

“Oh, thank you, father,” says the little one.

“And what will you do with them?” says he.

“I shall spin the apple in the saucer,” says the little pretty one, and at that the old merchant burst out laughing.

“They don’t call you ‘Little Stupid’ for nothing,” says he.

Well, they all had their fairings, and the two elder sisters, the bad ones, they ran off and put on the new dress and the new necklace, and came out and strutted about, preening themselves like herons, now on one leg and now on the other, to see how they looked. But Little Stupid, she just sat herself down beside the stove, and took the transparent apple and set it in the silver saucer, and she laughed softly to herself. And then she began spinning the apple in the saucer.

Round and round the apple spun in the saucer, faster and faster, till you couldn’t see the apple at all, nothing but a mist like a little whirlpool in the silver saucer. And the little good one looked at it, and her eyes shone like yours.

Her sisters laughed at her.

“Spinning an apple in a saucer and staring at it, the little stupid,” they said, as they strutted about the room, listening to the rustle of the new dress and fingering the bright round stones of the necklace.

But the little pretty one did not mind them. She sat in the corner watching the spinning apple. And as it spun she talked to it.

“Spin, spin, apple in the silver saucer.” This is what she said. “Spin so that I may see the world. Let me have a peep at the little father Tzar on his high throne. Let me see the rivers and the ships and the great towns far away.”

And as she looked at the little glass whirlpool in the saucer, there was the Tzar, the little father—God preserve him!—sitting on his high throne. Ships sailed on the seas, their white sails swelling in the wind. There was

Moscow with its white stone walls and painted churches. Why, there were the market at Nijni Novgorod, and the Arab merchants with their camels, and the Chinese with their blue trousers and bamboo staves. And then there was the great river Volga, with men on the banks towing ships against the stream. Yes, and she saw a sturgeon asleep in a deep pool.

“Oh! oh! oh!” says the little pretty one, as she saw all these things.

And the bad ones, they saw how her eyes shone, and they came and looked over her shoulder, and saw how all the world was there, in the spinning apple and the silver saucer. And the old father came and looked over her shoulder too, and he saw the market at Nijni Novgorod.

“Why, there is the inn where I put up the horses,” says he. “You haven’t done so badly after all, Little Stupid.”

And the little pretty one, Little Stupid, went on staring into the glass whirlpool in the saucer, spinning the apple, and seeing all the world she had never seen before, floating there before her in the saucer, brighter than leaves in sunlight.

The bad ones, the elder sisters, were sick with envy.

“Little Stupid,” says the first, “if you will give me your silver saucer and your transparent apple, I will give you my fine new necklace.”

“Little Stupid,” says the second, “I will give you my new dress with gold hems if you will give me your transparent apple and your silver saucer.”

“Oh, I couldn’t do that,” says the Little Stupid, and she goes on spinning the apple in the saucer and seeing what was happening all over the world.

So the bad ones put their wicked heads together and thought of a plan. And they took their father’s axe, and went into the deep forest and hid it under a bush.

The next day they waited till afternoon, when work was done, and the little pretty one was spinning her apple in the saucer. Then they said,—

“Come along, Little Stupid; we are all going to gather berries in the forest.”

“Do you really want me to come too?” says the little one. She would rather have played with her apple and saucer.

But they said, “Why, of course. You don’t think we can carry all the berries ourselves!”

So the little one jumped up, and found the baskets, and went with them to the forest. But before she started she ran to her father, who was counting his money, and was not too pleased to be interrupted, for figures go quickly out of your head when you have a lot of them to remember. She asked him to take care of the silver saucer and the transparent apple for fear she would lose them in the forest.

“Very well, little bird,” says the old man, and he put the things in a box with a lock and key to it. He was a merchant, you know, and that sort are always careful about things, and go clattering about with a lot of keys at their belt. I’ve nothing to lock up, and never had, and perhaps it is just as well, for I could never be bothered with keys.

So the little one picks up all three baskets and runs off after the others, the bad ones, with black hearts under their necklaces and new dresses.

They went deep into the forest, picking berries, and the little one picked so fast that she soon had a basket full. She was picking and picking, and did not see what the bad ones were doing. They were fetching the axe.

The little one stood up to straighten her back, which ached after so much stooping, and she saw her two sisters standing in front of her, looking at her cruelly. Their baskets lay on the ground quite empty. They had not picked a berry. The eldest had the axe in her hand.

The little one was frightened.

“What is it, sisters?” says she; “and why do you look at me with cruel eyes? And what is the axe for? You are not going to cut berries with an axe.”

“No, Little Stupid,” says the first, “we are not going to cut berries with the axe.”

“No, Little Stupid,” says the second; “the axe is here for something else.”

The little one begged them not to frighten her.

Says the first, “Give me your transparent apple.”

Says the second, “Give me your silver saucer.”

“If you don’t give them up at once, we shall kill you.” That is what the bad ones said.

The poor little one begged them. “O darling sisters, do not kill me! I haven’t got the saucer or the apple with me at all.”

“What a lie!” say the bad ones. “You never would leave it behind.”

And one caught her by the hair, and the other swung the axe, and between them they killed the little pretty one, who was called Little Stupid because she was so good.

Then they looked for the saucer and the apple, and could not find them. But it was too late now. So they made a hole in the ground, and buried the little one under a birch tree.

When the sun went down the bad ones came home, and they wailed with false voices, and rubbed their eyes to make the tears come. They made their eyes red and their noses too, and they did not look any prettier for that.

“What is the matter with you, little pigeons?” said the old merchant and his wife. I would not say “little pigeons” to such bad ones. Black-hearted crows is what I would call them.”

And they wail and lament aloud,—

“We are miserable for ever. Our poor little sister is lost. We looked for her everywhere. We heard the wolves howling. They must have eaten her.”

The old mother and father cried like rivers in springtime, because they loved the little pretty one, who was called Little Stupid because she was so good.

But before their tears were dry the bad ones began to ask for the silver saucer and the transparent apple.

“No, no,” says the old man; “I shall keep them for ever, in memory of my poor little daughter whom God has taken away.”

So the bad ones did not gain by killing their little sister.

“That is one good thing,” said Vanya.

“But is that all, grandfather?” said Maroosia.

“Wait a bit, little pigeons. Too much haste set his shoes on fire. You listen, and you will hear what happened,” said old Peter. He took a pinch of snuff from a little wooden box, and then he went on with his tale.

Time did not stop with the death of the little girl. Winter came, and the snow with it. Everything was all white, just as it is now. And the wolves came to the doors of the huts, even into the villages, and no one stirred farther than he need. And then the snow melted, and the buds broke on the trees, and the birds began singing, and the sun shone warmer every day. The old people had almost forgotten the little pretty one who lay dead in the forest. The bad ones had not forgotten, because now they had to do the work, and they did not like that at all.

And then one day some lambs strayed away into the forest, and a young shepherd went after them to bring them safely back to their mothers. And as he wandered this way and that through the forest, following their light tracks, he came to a little birch tree, bright with new leaves, waving over a little mound of earth. And there was a reed growing in the mound, and that, you know as well as I, is a strange thing, one reed all by itself under a birch tree in the forest. But it was no stranger than the flowers, for there were flowers round it, some red as the sun at dawn and others blue as the summer sky.

Well, the shepherd looks at the reed, and he looks at those flowers, and he thinks, “I’ve never seen anything like that before. I’ll make a whistle-pipe of that reed, and keep it for a memory till I grow old.”

So he did. He cut the reed, and sat himself down on the mound, and carved away at the reed with his knife, and got the pith out of it by pushing a twig through it, and beating it gently till the bark swelled, made holes in it, and there was his whistle-pipe. And then he put it to his lips to see what sort of music he could make on it.

But that he never knew, for before his lips touched it the whistle-pipe began playing by itself and reciting in a girl's sweet voice. This is what it sang:—

“Play, play, whistle-pipe. Bring happiness to my dear father and to my little mother. I was killed—yes, my life was taken from me in the deep forest for the sake of a silver saucer, for the sake of a transparent apple.”

When he heard that the shepherd went back quickly to the village to show it to the people. And all the way the whistle-pipe went on playing and reciting, singing its little song. And everyone who heard it said, “What a strange song! But who is it who was killed?”

“I know nothing about it,” says the shepherd, and he tells them about the mound and the reed and the flowers, and how he cut the reed and made the whistle-pipe, and how the whistle-pipe does its playing by itself.

And as he was going through the village, with all the people crowding about him, the old merchant, that one who was the father of the two bad ones and of the little pretty one, came along and listened with the rest. And when he heard the words about the silver saucer and the transparent apple, he snatched the whistle-pipe from the shepherd boy. And still it sang:—

“Play, play, whistle-pipe! Bring happiness to my dear father and to my little mother. I was killed—yes, my life was taken from me in the deep forest for the sake of a silver saucer, for the sake of a transparent apple.”

And the old merchant remembered the little good one, and his tears trickled over his cheeks and down his old beard. Old men love little pigeons, you know. And he said to the shepherd,—

“Take me at once to the mound, where you say you cut the reed.”

The shepherd led the way, and the old man walked beside him, crying, while the whistle-pipe in his hand went on singing and reciting its little song over and over again.

They came to the mound under the birch tree, and there were the flowers, shining red and blue, and there in the middle of the mound was the Stump of the reed which the shepherd had cut.

The whistle-pipe sang on and on.

Well, there and then they dug up the mound, and there was the little girl lying under the dark earth as if she

were asleep.

“O God of mine,” says the old merchant, “this is my daughter, my little pretty one, whom we called Little Stupid.” He began to weep loudly and wring his hands; but the whistle-pipe, playing and reciting, changed its song. This is what it sang:—

“My sisters took me into the forest to look for the red berries. In the deep forest they killed poor me for the sake of a silver saucer, for the sake of a transparent apple. Wake me, dear father, from a bitter dream, by fetching water from the well of the Tzar.”

How the people scowled at the two sisters! They scowled, they cursed them for the bad ones they were. And the bad ones, the two sisters, wept, and fell on their knees, and confessed everything. They were taken, and their hands were tied, and they were shut up in prison.

“Do not kill them,” begged the old merchant, “for then I should have no daughters at all, and when there are no fish in the river we make shift with crays. Besides, let me go to the Tzar and beg water from his well. Perhaps my little daughter will wake up, as the whistle-pipe tells us.”

And the whistle-pipe sang again:—

“Wake me, wake me, dear father, from a bitter dream, by fetching water from the well of the Tzar. Till then, dear father, a blanket of black earth and the shade of the green birch tree.”

So they covered the little girl with her blanket of earth, and the shepherd with his dogs watched the mound night and day. He begged for the whistle-pipe to keep him company, poor lad, and all the days and nights he thought of the sweet face of the little pretty one he had seen there under the birch tree.

The old merchant harnessed his horse, as if he were going to the town; and he drove off through the forest, along the roads, till he came to the palace of the Tzar, the little father of all good Russians. And then he left his horse and cart and waited on the steps of the palace.

The Tzar, the little father, with rings on his fingers and a gold crown on his head, came out on the steps in the morning sunshine; and as for the old merchant, he fell on his knees and kissed the feet of the Tzar, and begged,—

“O little father, Tzar, give me leave to take water—just a little drop of water—from your holy well.”

“And what will you do with it?” says the Tzar.

“I will wake my daughter from a bitter dream,” says the old merchant. “She was murdered by her sisters—killed in the deep forest—for the sake of a silver saucer, for the sake of a transparent apple.”

“A silver saucer?” says the Tzar—“a transparent apple? Tell me about that.”

And the old merchant told the Tzar everything, just as I have told it to you.

And the Tzar, the little father, he gave the old merchant a glass of water from his holy well. “But,” says he, “when your daughterkin wakes, bring her to me, and her sisters with her, and also the silver saucer and the transparent apple.”

The old man kissed the ground before the Tzar, and took the glass of water and drove home with it, and I can tell you he was careful not to spill a drop. He carried it all the way in one hand as he drove.

He came to the forest and to the flowering mound under the little birch tree, and there was the shepherd watching with his dogs. The old merchant and the shepherd took away the blanket of black earth. Tenderly, tenderly the shepherd used his fingers, until the little girl, the pretty one, the good one, lay there as sweet as if she were not dead.

Then the merchant scattered the holy water from the glass over the little girl. And his daughterkin blushed as she lay there, and opened her eyes, and passed a hand across them, as if she were waking from a dream. And then she leapt up, crying and laughing, and clung about her old father’s neck. And there they stood, the two of them, laughing and crying with joy. And the shepherd could not take his eyes from her, and in his eyes, too, there were tears.

But the old father did not forget what he had promised the Tzar. He set the little pretty one, who had been so

good that her wicked sisters had called her Stupid, to sit beside him on the cart. And he brought something from the house in a coffer of wood, and kept it under his coat. And they brought out the two sisters, the bad ones, from their dark prison, and set them in the cart. And the Little Stupid kissed them and cried over them, and wanted to loose their hands, but the old merchant would not let her. And they all drove together till they came to the palace of the Tzar. The shepherd boy could not take his eyes from the little pretty one, and he ran all the way behind the cart.

Well, they came to the palace, and waited on the steps; and the Tzar came out to take the morning air, and he saw the old merchant, and the two sisters with their hands tied, and the little pretty, one, as lovely as a spring day. And the Tzar saw her, and could not take his eyes from her. He did not see the shepherd boy, who hid away among the crowd.

Says the great Tzar to his soldiers, pointing to the bad sisters, "These two are to be put to death at sunset. When the sun goes down their heads must come off, for they are not fit to see another day."

Then he turns to the little pretty one, and he says: "Little sweet pigeon, where is your silver saucer, and where is your transparent apple?"

The old merchant took the wooden box from under his coat, and opened it with a key at his belt, and gave it to the little one, and she took out the silver saucer and the transparent apple and gave them to the Tzar.

"O lord Tzar," says she, "O little father, spin the apple in the saucer, and you will see whatever you wish to see—your soldiers, your high hills, your forests, your plains, your rivers, and Everything in all Russia."

And the Tzar, the little father, spun the apple in the saucer till it seemed a little whirlpool of white mist, and there he saw glittering towns, and regiments of soldiers marching to war, and ships, and day and night, and the clear stars above the trees. He looked at these things and thought much of them.

Then the little good one threw herself on her knees before him, weeping.

“O little father, Tzar,” she says, “take my transparent apple and my silver saucer; only forgive my sisters. Do not kill them because of me. If their heads are cut off when the sun goes down, it would have been better for me to lie under the blanket of black earth in the shade of the birch tree in the forest.”

The Tzar was pleased with the kind heart of the little pretty one, and he forgave the bad ones, and their hands were untied, and the little pretty one kissed them, and they kissed her again and said they were sorry.

The old merchant looked up at the sun, and saw how the time was going.

“Well, well,” says he, “it’s time we were getting ready to go home.”

They all fell on their knees before the Tzar and thanked him. But the Tzar could not take his eyes from the little pretty one, and would not let her go.

“Little sweet pigeon,” says he, “will you be my Tzaritza, and a kind mother to Holy Russia?”

And the little good one did not know what to say. She blushed and answered, very rightly, “As my father orders, and as my little mother wishes, so shall it be.”

The Tzar was pleased with her answer, and he sent a messenger on a galloping horse to ask leave from the little pretty one’s old mother. And of course the old mother said that she was more than willing. So that was all right. Then there was a wedding—such a wedding!—and every city in Russia sent a silver plate of bread, and a golden salt-cellar, with their good wishes to the Tzar and Tzaritza.

Only the shepherd boy, when he heard that the little pretty one was to marry the Tzar, turned sadly away and went off into the forest.

“Are you happy, little sweet pigeon?” says the Tzar.

“Oh yes,” says the Little Stupid, who was now Tzaritza and mother of Holy Russia; “but there is one thing that would make me happier.”

“And what is that?” says the lord Tzar.

“I cannot bear to lose my old father and my little mother and my dear sisters. Let them be with me here in the

palace, as they were in my father's house.”

The Tzar laughed at the little pretty one, but he agreed, and the little pretty one ran to tell them the good news. She said to her sisters, “Let all be forgotten, and all be forgiven, and may the evil eye fall on the one who first speaks of what has been!”

For a long time the Tzar lived, and the little pretty one the Tzaritza, and they had many children, and were very happy together. And ever since then the Tzars of Russia have kept the silver saucer and the transparent apple, so that, whenever they wish, they can see everything that is going on all over Russia. Perhaps even now the Tzar, the little father—God preserve him!—is spinning the apple in the saucer, and looking at us, and thinking it is time that two little pigeons were in bed.

“Is that the end?” said Vanya.

“That is the end,” said old Peter.

“Poor shepherd boy!” said Maroosia.

“I don't know about that,” said old Peter. “You see, if he had married the little pretty one, and had to have all the family to live with him, he would have had them in a hut like ours instead of in a great palace, and so he would never have had room to get away from them. And now, little pigeons, who is going to be first into bed?”

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