



The Book of Magic

John Theophilus Naaké

Russian

Easy
4 min read

A soldier was quartered in a certain town. He had taken to study the Black Art, and had got possession of books which dealt therewith. One day, during his absence from his quarters, one of his comrades came to see him. Not finding him at home, the visitor took up one of the soldier's books, and for want of other occupation began to read it. It was in the evening, and he read by the light of a lamp. The book was full of names and nothing else. He had read about half of the names when he raised his head, and looking around him, saw that the room was full of diabolical looking beings. The soldier was struck with terror, and not knowing what to do, began again to read the book. After reading for some little time, he again looked round him; the number of spirits had increased. Again he read, and having finished the book, looked again around him. By this time the number of demons had so much increased that there was barely space for them in the room. They sat upon each other's shoulders, and pressed continually forward round the reader. The soldier saw that the situation was serious; he shut the book, closed his eyes, and anxiously awaited his comrade. The spirits pressed closer and closer upon him, crying,—

“Give us work to do—quick!”

The soldier reflected awhile, and then said,—

“Fill up the cisterns of all the baths in the town with water brought thither in a sieve.”

The demons flew away. In two minutes they returned and said,—

“It is done! Give us some more work to do—quick!”

“Pull the Voivode’s house down, brick by brick—but take care you do not touch or disturb the inmates; then build it up again as it was before.”

The goblins disappeared, but in two minutes returned.

“It is done!” they cried. “Give us more work—quick!”

“Go,” said the soldier, “and count the grains of sand that lie at the bottom of the Volga, the number of drops of water that are in the river, and of the fish that swim in it, from its source to its mouth.”

The spirits flew away; but in another minute they returned, having executed their task. Thus, before the soldier could think of some new labour to be done, the old one was completed, and the demons were again at his side demanding more work. When he began to think what he should give them, they pressed round him, and threatened him with instant death if he did not give them something to do. The soldier was becoming exhausted, and there was yet no sign of his comrade’s return. What course should he take? How deliver himself from the evil spirits? The soldier thought to himself,—

“While I was reading the book, not one of the demons came near me. Let me try to read it again; perhaps that will keep them off.”

Again he began to read the book of magic, but he soon observed that as he read the number of phantoms increased, so that soon such a host of the spirit-world surrounded him that the very lamp was scarcely visible. When the soldier hesitated at a word, or paused to rest himself, the goblins became more restless and violent, demanding,—

“Give us work to do! Give us work!”

The soldier was almost worn out, and unhappily knew not how to help himself. Suddenly a thought occurred to him,—

“The spirits appeared when I read the book from the beginning; let me now read it from the end, perhaps this will send them way.”

He turned the book round and began to read it from the end. After reading for some time he observed that the number of spirits decreased; the lamp began again to burn brightly, and there was an empty space around him.

The soldier was delighted, and continued his reading. He read and read until he had read them all away. And thus he saved himself from the demons. His comrade came in soon afterwards. The soldier told him what had happened.

“It is fortunate for you,” said his comrade, “that you began to read the book backwards in time. Had you not thus read them away by midnight they would have devoured you.”

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