

The Hut in the Forest

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Russian

Intermediate

7 min read

Outside in the forest there was deep snow. The white snow had crusted the branches of the pine trees, and piled itself up them till they bent under its weight. Now and then a snow-laden branch would bend too far, and huge lumps of snow fell crashing to the ground under the trees. Then the branch would swing up, and the snow covered it again with a cold white burden. Sitting in the hut you could hear the crashing again and again out in the forest, as the tired branches flung down their loads of snow. Yes, and now and then there was the howling of wolves far away.

Little Maroosia heard them, and thought of them out there in the dark as they galloped over the snow. She sat closer to Vanya, her brother, and they were both as near as they could get to the door of the stove, where they could see the red fire burning busily, keeping the whole hut warm. The stove filled a quarter of the hut, but that was because it was a bed as well. There were blankets on it, and in those blankets Vanya and Maroosia rolled up and went to sleep at night, as warm as little baking cakes.

The hut was made of pine logs cut from the forest. You could see the marks of the axe. Old Peter was the grandfather of Maroosia and Vanya. He lived alone with them in the hut in the forest, because their father and mother were both dead. Maroosia and Vanya could hardly remember them, and they were very happy with old Peter, who was very kind to them and did all he could to keep them warm and well fed. He let them help him in

everything, even in stuffing the windows with moss to keep the cold out when winter began. The moss kept the light out too, but that did not matter. It would be all the jollier in the spring when the sun came pouring in.

Besides old Peter and Maroosia and Vanya there were Vladimir and Bayan. Vladimir was a cat, a big black cat, as stately as an emperor, and just now he was lying in Vanya's arms fast asleep. Bayan was a dog, a tall gray wolf-dog. He could jump over the table with a single bound. When he was in the hut he usually lay underneath the table, because that was the only place where he could lie without being in the way. And, of course at meal times he was in the way even there. Just now he was out with old Peter.

"I wonder what story it will be tonight?" said Maroosia.

"So do I," said Vanya. "I wish they'd be quick and come back."

Vladimir stirred suddenly in Vanya's lap, and a minute later they heard the scrunch of boots in the snow, and the stamping of old Peter's feet trying to get the snow off his boots. Then the door opened, and Bayan pushed his way in and shook himself, and licked Maroosia and Vanya and startled Vladimir, and lay down under the table and came out again, because he was so pleased to be home. And old Peter came in after him, with his gun on his back and a hare in his hand. He shook himself just like Bayan, and the snow flew off like spray. He hung up his gun, flung the hare into a corner of the hut, and laughed.

"You are snug in here, little pigeons," he said.

Vanya and Maroosia had jumped up to welcome him, and when he opened his big sheepskin coat, they tumbled into it together and clung to his belt. Then he closed the big woolly coat over the top of them and they squealed; and he opened it a little way and looked down at them over his beard, and then closed it again for a moment before letting them out. He did this every night, and Bayan always barked when they were shut up inside.

Then old Peter took his big coat off and lifted down the samovar from the shelf. The samovar is like a big teapurn, with a red-hot fire in the middle of it keeping the water boiling. It hums like a bee on the tea-table, and the steam rises in a little jet from a tiny hole in the top. The boiling water comes out of a tap at the bottom. Old Peter threw in the lighted sticks and charcoal, and made a draught to draw the heat, and then set the samovar on the table with the little fire crackling in its inside. Then he cut some big lumps of black bread. Then he took

a great saucepan full of soup, that was simmering on the stove, and emptied it into a big wooden bowl. Then he went to the wall where, on three nails, hung three wooden spoons, deep like ladles. There were one big spoon, for old Peter; and two little spoons, one for Vanya and one for Maroosia.

And all the time that old Peter was getting supper ready he was answering questions and making jokes—old ones, of course, that he made every day—about how plump the children were, and how fat was better to eat than butter, and what the Man in the Moon said when he fell out, and what the wolf said who caught his own tail and ate himself up before he found out his mistake.

And Vanya and Maroosia danced about the hut and chuckled.

Then they had supper, all three dipping their wooden spoons in the big bowl together, and eating a tremendous lot of black bread. And, of course, there were scraps for Vladimir and a bone for Bayan.

After that they had tea with sugar but no milk, because they were Russians and liked it that way.

Then came the stories. Old Peter made another glass of tea for himself, not for the children. His throat was old, he said, and took a lot of keeping wet; and they were young, and would not sleep if they drank tea too near bedtime. Then he threw a log of wood into the stove. Then he lit a short little pipe, full of very strong tobacco, called Mahorka, which has a smell like hot tin. And he puffed, and the smoke got in his eyes, and he wiped them with the back of his big hand.

All the time he was doing this Vanya and Maroosia were snuggling together close by the stove, thinking what story they would ask for, and listening to the crashing of the snow as it fell from the trees outside. Now that old Peter was at home, the noise made them feel comfortable and warm. Before, perhaps, it made them feel a little frightened.

“Well, little pigeons, little hawks, little bear cubs, what is it to be?” said old Peter.

“We don’t know,” said Maroosia.

“Long hair, short sense, little she-pigeon,” said old Peter. “All this time and not thought of a story? Would you like the tale of the little Snow Girl who was not loved so much as a hen?”

“Not tonight, grandfather,” said Vanya.

“We’d like that tale when the snow melts,” said Maroosia.

“Tonight we’d like a story we’ve never heard before,” said Vanya.

“Well, well,” said old Peter, combing his great gray beard with his fingers, and looking out at them with twinkling eyes from under his big bushy eyebrows. “Have I ever told you the story of ‘The Silver Saucer and the Transparent Apple?’”

“No, no, never,” cried Vanya and Maroosia at once.

Old Peter took a last pull at his pipe, and Vanya and Maroosia wriggled with excitement. Then he drank a sip of tea. Then he began.

Note: You can read his first story, The Tale of the Silver Saucer and the Transparent Apple next.

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