

The Laughing Prince: The Boy Who Could Talk Nonsense

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Easy
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There was once a farmer who had three sons and one little daughter. The eldest son was a studious boy who learned so much out of books that the farmer said:

“We must send Mihailo to school and make a priest of him.”

The second boy was a trader. Whatever you had he would get it from you by offering you something else for it. And always what he gave you was worth less than what you gave him.

“Jakov will make a fine peddler,” the farmer said. “He’s industrious and sharp and some day he will probably be a rich man.”

But Stefan, the farmer’s youngest son, had no special talent and because he didn’t spend all his time with his nose in a book and because he never made the best of a bargain his brothers scorned him. Militza, his little sister, loved him dearly for he was kind and jolly and in the evening he was always ready to tell her stories and play with her. But the farmer, of course, listened to the older brothers.

“I don’t know about poor Stefan,” he used to say. “He’s a good boy but he talks nonsense. I suppose he’ll have to stay on the farm and work.”

Now the truth is the farm was a fine place for Stefan for he was strong and lusty and he liked to plow and harvest and he had a wonderful way with the animals. He talked to them as if they were human beings and the horses all whinnied when he came near, and the cows rubbed their soft noses against his shoulder, and as for the pigs—they loved him so much that whenever they saw him they used to run squealing between his legs.

“Stefan is nothing but a farmer!” Mihailo used to say as though being a farmer was something to be ashamed of.

And Jakov said:

“If the village people could see the pigs following him about, how they’d laugh at him! I hope when I go to the village to live he won’t be visiting me all the time!”

Another thing the older brothers couldn’t understand about Stefan was why he was always laughing and joking. He did the work of two men but whether he was working or resting you could always hear him cracking his merry jokes and laughing his jolly laugh.

“I think he’s foolish!” Mihailo said.

Jakov hoped that the village people wouldn’t hear about his carryings on.

“They’d laugh at him,” he said, “and they’d laugh at us, too, because we’re his brothers.”

But Stefan didn’t care. The more they frowned at him, the louder he laughed, and in spite of their dark looks he kept on cracking his merry jokes and talking nonsense. And every evening after supper his little sister, Militza, clapped her hands and cried:

“Now, Stefan, tell me a story! Tell me a story!”

“Father,” Mihailo would say, “you ought to make him keep quiet! He’s foolish and all he does is fill Militza’s head with nonsense!”

This always made Militza very indignant and she would stamp her little foot and say:

“He isn’t foolish! He knows more than any one! And he can do more things than any one else and he’s the handsomest brother in the world!”

You see Militza loved Stefan dearly and when you love a person of course you think that person is wonderful. But the father supposed that Mihailo must be right for Mihailo studied in books. So he shook his head and sighed every time he thought of Stefan.

Now the kingdom in which the three brothers lived was ruled over by a great Tsar who had an only daughter. In disappointment that he had no son, the Tsar was having his daughter brought up as though she were a boy. He sent all over the world for tutors and teachers and had the poor girl taught statecraft and law and philosophy and all the other things that the heir to the throne ought to know.

The Princess because she was an obedient girl and because she loved her father tried to spend all her time in study. But the dry old scholars whom the Tsar employed as teachers were not amusing companions for a young girl and the first lady-in-waiting who was in constant attendance was scarcely any better for she, too, was old and thin and very prim.

If the poor little Princess between her geography lesson and her arithmetic lesson would peep for a moment into a mirror, the first lady-in-waiting would tap her arm reprovingly and say:

“My dear, vanity is not becoming in a princess!”

One day the little Princess lost her temper and answered sharply:

“But I’m a girl even if I am a princess and I love to look in mirrors and I love to make myself pretty and I’d love to go to a ball every night of my life and dance with handsome young men!”

“You talk like the daughter of a farmer!” the first lady-in-waiting said.

Then the Princess, because she lost her temper still further, said something she should not have said.

“I wish I were the daughter of a farmer!” she declared. “Then I could wear pretty ribbons and go dancing and the boys would come courting me! As it is I have to spend all my time with funny old men and silly old women!”

Now even if her tutors and teachers were funny looking old men, even if the first lady-in-waiting was a silly old woman, the Princess should not have said so. It hurt the feelings of the first lady-in-waiting and made her angry and she ran off to the Tsar at once and complained most bitterly.

“Is this my reward after all my years of loving service to your daughter?” she asked. “It is true that I’ve grown old and thin looking after her manners and now she calls me a silly old woman! And all the learned wise men and scholars that you have gathered from the far corners of the earth—she points her finger at them and calls them funny old men!”

The fact is they were funny looking, most of them, but yet the first lady-in-waiting was right: the Princess should not have said so.

“And think of her ingratitude to yourself, O Tsar!” the first lady-in-waiting continued. “You plan to make her the heir to your throne and yet she says she wishes she were a farmer’s daughter so that she could deck herself out in ribbons and have the boys come courting her! A nice thing for a princess to say!”

The Tsar when he heard this fell into an awful rage. (The truth is whatever temper the Princess had she inherited direct from her father.)

“Wow! Wow!” he roared, just that way. “Send the Princess to me at once. I’ll soon have her singing another tune!”

So the first lady-in-waiting sent the Princess to her father and as soon as he saw her he began roaring again and saying:

“Wow! Wow! What do you mean—funny old men and silly old women?”

Now whenever the Tsar began roaring and saying, “Wow! Wow!” the Princess always stiffened, and instead of being the sweet and obedient daughter she usually was she became obstinate. Her pretty eyes would flash and

her soft pretty face would harden and people would whisper: “Mercy on us, how much she looks like her father!”

“That’s just what I mean!” the Princess said. “They’re a lot of funny old men and silly old women and I’m tired of them! I want to be amused! I want to laugh!”

“Wow! Wow! Wow!” roared the Tsar. “A fine princess you are! Go straight back to the schoolroom and behave yourself!”

So the little Princess marched out of the throne room holding her head very high and looking so much like the Tsar that the first lady-in-waiting was positively frightened.

The Princess went back to the schoolroom but she did not behave herself. She was really very naughty. When the poor man who knew more than anybody in the world about the influence of the stars upon the destinies of nations came to give her a lesson, she threw his book out the window. When the superannuated old general who was teaching her military manœuvres offered her a diagram on which the enemy was represented by a series of black dots and our soldiers by a series of red dots, she took the paper and tore it in two. And worst of all when the old scholar who was teaching her Turkish—for a princess must be able to speak all languages—dropped his horn spectacles on the floor, she deliberately stepped on them and broke them.

When the Tsar heard all these things he just wow-wowed something terrible.

“Lock that young woman in her chamber!” he ordered. “Feed her on bread and water until she’s ready to apologize!”

But the Princess, far from being frightened by this treatment, calmly announced:

“I won’t eat even your old bread and water until you send me some one who will make me laugh!”

Now this frightened the Tsar because he knew how obstinate the Princess could be on occasions. (He ought to know, too, for the Princess had that streak of obstinacy direct from himself.)

“This will never do!” he said.

He hurried to the Princess's chamber. He found her in bed with her pretty hair spread out on the pillow like a golden fan.

"My dear," the Tsar said, "I was joking. You don't have to eat only bread and water. You may have anything you want."

"Thank you," the Princess said, "but I'll never eat another bite of anything until you send me some one who will make me laugh. I'm tired of living in this gloomy old castle with a lot of old men and old women who do nothing but instruct me and with a father who always loses his temper and says, 'Wow! Wow!'"

"But it's a beautiful castle!" the poor Tsar said. "And I'm sure we're all doing our very best to educate you!"

"But I want to be amused as well as educated!" the little Princess said. And then, because she felt she was going to cry, she turned her face to the wall and wouldn't say another word.

What was the Tsar to do? He called together his councilors and asked them how was the Princess to be made to laugh. The councilors were wise about state matters but not one of them could suggest a means of amusing the Princess. The Master of Ceremonies did indeed begin to say something about a nice young man but instantly the Tsar roared out such a wrathful, "Wow! Wow!" that the Master of Ceremonies coughed and pretended he hadn't spoken.

Then the Tsar called together the scholars and the teachers and the first lady-in-waiting. He glared at them savagely and roared:

"Wow! Wow! A nice lot you are! I put you in charge of my daughter and not one of you has sense enough to know that the poor child needs a little amusement! I have a good mind to have you all thrown into the dungeon!"

"But, Your Majesty," quavered one poor old scholar, "I was not employed as a buffoon but as a teacher of astrology!"

"And I," another said, "as a teacher of languages!"

“And I as a teacher of philosophy!”

“Silence!” roared the Tsar. “Between you all you have about killed my poor child! Now I ask you: With all your learning doesn’t one of you know how to make a young girl laugh?”

Apparently not one of them did, for no one answered.

“Not even you?” the Tsar said, looking at the first lady-in-waiting.

“When you called me to Court,” the first lady-in-waiting answered, drawing herself up in a most refined manner, “you said you wished me to teach your daughter etiquette. As you said nothing about amusement, quite naturally I confined myself to the subject of behavior. If I do say it myself, no one has ever been more devoted to duty than I. I am constantly saying to her: ‘That isn’t the way a princess should act!’ In fact for years there has hardly been a moment in the day when I haven’t corrected her for something!”

“Poor child!” groaned the Tsar. “No wonder she wants a change! Oh, what fools you all are in spite of your learning! Don’t you know that a young girl is a young girl even if she is a Princess!”

Well, the scholars weren’t any more help to the Tsar than the councilors, and finally in desperation he sent heralds through the land to announce that to any one who could make the Princess laugh he would give three bags of gold.

Three bags of gold don’t grow on the bushes every day and instantly all the youths and men and old men who had stories that their sweethearts and their wives and their daughters laughed at hurried to the castle.

One by one they were admitted to the Princess’s chamber. They entered hopefully but when they saw the Tsar sitting at one side of the door muttering, “Wow! Wow!” in his beard, and the old first lady-in-waiting at the other side of the door watching them scornfully, and the Princess herself in bed with her lovely hair spread out like a golden fan on the pillow, they forgot their funny stories and hemmed and hawed and stammered and had finally, one after another, to be turned out in disgrace.

One day went by and two and three and still the Princess refused to eat. In despair the Tsar sent out his heralds again. This time he said that to any one who would make the Princess laugh he would give the Princess’s hand

in marriage and make him joint heir to the kingdom.

“I had expected to wed her to the son of some great Tsar,” he sighed, “but I’d rather marry her to a farmer than see her die of starvation!”

The heralds rode far and wide until every one, even the people on the most distant farms, had heard of the Tsar’s offer.

“I won’t try again,” said Mihailo, the oldest son of the farmer I’ve already told you about. “When I went there the day before yesterday I began telling her a funny story out of my Latin book but instead of laughing she said: ‘Oh, send him away!’ So now she’ll have to starve to death for all of me!”

“Me, too!” said Jakov, the second son. “When I tried to tell her that funny story of how I traded the moldy oats for the old widow’s fat pig, instead of laughing she looked me straight in the face and said: ‘Cheat!’”

“Stefan ought to go,” Mihailo suggested. “Maybe she’d laugh at him! Everybody else does!”

He spoke sneeringly but Stefan only smiled.

“Who knows? Perhaps I will go. If I do make her laugh then, O my brothers, the laugh will be on you for I shall become Tsar and you two will be known as my two poor brothers. Ho! Ho! Ho! What a joke that would be!”

Stefan laughed loud and heartily and his little sister joined him, but his brothers looked at him sourly.

“He grows more foolish all the time!” they told each other.

When they were gone to bed, Militza slipped over to Stefan and whispered in his ear:

“Brother, you must go to the Princess. Tell her the story that begins: In my young days when I was an old, old man.... I think she’ll just have to laugh, and if she laughs then she can eat and she must be very hungry by this time.”

At first Stefan said no, he wouldn’t go, but Militza insisted and finally, to please her, he said he would.

So early the next morning he dressed himself in his fine Sunday shirt with its blue and red embroidery. He put on his bright red Sunday sash and his long shiny boots. Then he mounted his horse and before his brothers

were awake rode off to the Tsar's castle.

There he awaited his turn to be admitted to the Princess's chamber. When he came in he was so young and healthy and vigorous that he seemed to bring with him a little of the freshness of outdoors. The first lady-in-waiting looked at him askance for without doubt he was a farmer lad and his table manners probably were not good. Well, he was a farmer lad and for that reason he didn't know that she was first lady-in-waiting. He glanced at her once and thought: "What an ugly old woman!" and thereafter he didn't think of her at all. He glanced likewise at the Tsar and the Tsar reminded him of a bull of his own. He wasn't afraid of the bull, so why be afraid of the Tsar?

Suddenly he saw the Princess lying in bed with her lovely hair spread out on the pillow like a golden fan and for a moment he couldn't speak. Then he knelt beside the bed and kissed her hand.

"Princess," he said, "I'm not learned and I'm not clever and I don't suppose I can succeed where so many wise men have failed. And even if I do make you laugh you won't have to marry me unless you want to because the reason I really came was to please Militza."

"Militza?"

"Yes, Princess, my little sister, Militza. She loves me very much and so she thinks the stories I tell are funny and she laughs at them. Last night she said to me: 'Stefan, you must go to the Princess and tell her the story that begins: In my young days when I was an old, old man.... I think she'll just have to laugh and if she laughs then she can eat and she must be very hungry by this time.'"

"I am," the Princess said, with a catch in her voice. Then she added: "I think I like that little sister of yours and I think I like you, too. I wish you would tell me the story that begins: In my young days when I was an old, old man...."

"But, Princess, it's a very foolish story."

"The foolisher, the better!"

Just here the first lady-in-waiting tried to correct the Princess for of course she should have said: "The more foolish, the better!" but the Tsar shut her up with a black frown and one fierce, "Wow!"

"Well, then," Stefan began:

In my young days when I was an old, old man I used to count my bees every morning. It was easy enough to count the bees but not the beehives because I had too many hives. One day when I finished counting I found that my best bee was missing. At once I saddled a rooster and set out to find him.

"Father!" cried the Princess. "Did you hear what Stefan said? He said he saddled his rooster!"

"Umph!" muttered the Tsar, and the first lady-in-waiting said severely:

"Princess, do not interrupt! Young man, continue."

His track led to the sea which I rode across on a bridge. The first thing I saw on the other side of the sea was my bee. There he was in a field of millet harnessed to a plow. "That's my bee!" I shouted to the man who was driving him. "Is that so?" the man said, and without any words he gave me back my bee and handed me a bag of millet to pay for the plowing. I took the bag and tied it securely on the bee. Then I unsaddled the rooster and mounted the bee. The rooster, poor thing, was so tired that I had to take him by the hand and lead him along beside us.

"Father!" the Princess cried, "did you hear that? He took the rooster by the hand! Isn't that funny!"

"Umph!" grunted the Tsar, and the first lady-in-waiting whispered:

"Hush! Let the young man finish!"

Whilst we were crossing the bridge, the string of the bag broke and all my millet spilled out. When night came I tied the rooster to the bee and lay down on the seashore to sleep. During the night some wolves came and killed my bee and when I woke up I found that all the honey had run out of his body. There was so much honey that it rose up and up until it reached the ankles of the valleys and the knees of the mountains. I took a hatchet and swam down to a forest where I found two deer leaping about on one leg. I shot at the deer with my hatchet, killed them, and skinned them. With the skins I made two leather bottles. I filled these with the honey and

strapped them over the rooster's back. Then I rode home. I no sooner arrived home than my father was born. "We must have holy water for the christening," I said. "I suppose I must go to heaven to fetch some." But how was I to get there? I thought of my millet. Sure enough the dampness had made it grow so well that its tops now reached the sky. So all I had to do was to climb a millet stalk and there I was in heaven. Up there they had mown down some of my millet which they baked into a loaf and were eating with boiled milk. "That's my millet!" I said. "What do you want for it?" they asked me. "I want some holy water to christen my father who has just been born." So they gave me some holy water and I prepared to descend again to earth. But on earth there was a violent storm going on and the wind carried away my millet. So there I was with no way of getting down. I thought of my hair. It was so long that when I stood up it covered my ears and when I lay down it reached all the way to earth. So I pulled out a hair, tied it to a tree of heaven, and began descending by it. When it grew dark I made a knot in the hair and just sat where I was. It was cold, so I took a needle which I happened to have in my coat, split it up, and lighted a fire with the chips.

"Oh, father!" the Princess cried, "Stefan says he split a needle into kindling wood! Isn't he funny!"

"If you ask me—" the first lady-in-waiting began, but before she could say more the Tsar reached over and stepped on her toe so hard that she was forced to end her sentence with a little squeally, "Ouch!" The Princess, you see, was smiling and the Tsar was hoping that presently she would burst into a laugh. So he motioned Stefan to continue.

Then I lay down beside the fire and fell asleep. While I slept a spark from the fire fell on the hair and burned it through. I fell to earth with such force that I sank into the ground up to my chest. I couldn't budge, so I was forced to go home and get a spade and dig myself out. On the way home I crossed a field where the reapers were cutting corn. The heat was so great that they had to stop work. "I'll get our mare," I said, "and then you'll feel cooler." You know our mare is two days long and as broad as midnight and she has willow trees growing on her back. So I ran and got her and she cast such a cool shadow that the reapers were at once able to go back to work. Now they wanted some fresh drinking water, but when they went to the river they found it had frozen over. They came back to me and asked me would I get them some water. "Certainly," I said. I went to the river myself, then I took off my head and with it I broke a hole in the ice. After that it was easy enough to fetch them some water. "But where is your head?" they asked. "Oh!" I said, "I must have forgotten it!"

“Oh, father!” the Princess cried with a loud laugh, “he says he forgot his head! Then, Stefan, what did you do? What did you do?”

I ran back to the river and got there just as a fox was sniffing at my skull. “Hi, there!” I said, pulling the fox’s tail. The fox turned around and gave me a paper on which was written these words: NOW THE PRINCESS CAN EAT FOR SHE HAS LAUGHED AND STEFAN AND HIS LITTLE SISTER ARE VERY HAPPY.

“What nonsense!” the first lady-in-waiting murmured with a toss of her head.

“Yes, beautiful nonsense!” the Princess cried, clapping her hands and going off into peal after peal of merry laughter. “Isn’t it beautiful nonsense, father? And isn’t Stefan a dear lad? And, father, I’m awfully hungry! Please have some food sent in at once and Stefan must stay and eat with me.”

So the Tsar had great trays of food brought in: roast birds and vegetables and wheaten bread and many kinds of little cakes and honey and milk and fruit. And Stefan and the Princess ate and made merry and the Tsar joined them and even the first lady-in-waiting took one little cake which she crumbled in her handkerchief in a most refined manner.

Then Stefan rose to go and the Tsar said to him:

“Stefan, I will reward you richly. You have made the Princess laugh and besides you have not insisted on her marrying you. You are a fine lad and I shall never forget you.”

“But, father,” the Princess said, “I don’t want Stefan to go. He amuses me and I like him. He said. I needn’t marry him unless I wanted to but, father, I think I want to.”

“Wow! Wow!” the Tsar roared. “What! My daughter marry the son of a farmer!”

“Now, father,” the Princess said, “it’s no use your wow-wowing at me and you know it isn’t. If I can’t marry Stefan I won’t marry any one. And if I don’t marry any one I’m going to stop eating again. So that’s that!” And still holding Stefan’s hand, the Princess turned her face to the wall.

What could the poor Tsar do? At first he fumed and raged but as usual after a day or two he came around to the Princess’s way of thinking. In fact it soon seemed to him that Stefan had been his choice from the first and

when one of his councilors remarked: “Then, Your Majesty, there’s no use sending word to the neighboring kings that the Princess has reached a marriageable age and would like to look over their sons,” the Tsar flew into an awful temper and roared:

“Wow! Wow! You blockhead! Neighboring kings, indeed, and their good-for-nothing sons! No, siree! The husband I want for my daughter is an honest farmer lad who knows how to work and how to play! That’s the kind of son-in-law we need in this kingdom!

So Stefan and the little Princess were married and from that day the castle was no longer gloomy but rang with laughter and merriment. Presently the people of the kingdom, following the example of their rulers, were laughing, too, and cracking jokes and, strange to say, they soon found they were working all the better for their jollity.

Laughter grew so fashionable that even Mihailo and Jakov were forced to take it up. They didn’t do it very well but they practised at it conscientiously. Whenever people talked about Stefan, they always pushed forward importantly and said:

“Ho! Ho! Ho! Do you mean Stefan, the Laughing Prince? Ha! Ha! Ha! Why, do you know, he’s our own brother!”

As for Militza, the Princess had her come to the castle and said to her:

“I owe all my happiness to you, my dear, for you it was who knew that of course I would laugh at Stefan’s nonsense! What sensible girl wouldn’t?”

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