

The Soldier and Death

Arthur Ransome

Russian

Intermediate

29 min read

The soldier served God and the Great Tzar for twenty-five years, earned three dry biscuits, and set off to walk his way home. He kissed his companions with whom he had served so long, and boasted of the feasting there would be in the village when he should come marching home with all his wars behind him. Singing at the top of his voice he was as he set off. But as soon as he was alone on the high road, walking through the forest he began to think things over. And he thought to himself: All these years I have served the Tzar and had good clothes to my back and my belly full of victuals. And now I am like to be both hungry and cold. Already I've nothing but three dry biscuits.

Just then he met an old beggar, who stood in the road and crossed himself and asked alms for the love of God.

The soldier had not a copper piece in the world, so he gave the beggar one of his three dry biscuits.

He had not gone very far along the road when he met a second beggar, who leant on a stick and recited holy words and begged alms for the love of God.

The soldier gave him the second of his three dry biscuits.

And then, at a bend in the road, he met a third old beggar, with long white hair and beard and loathsome rags, who stood shaking by the the roadside, and he begged alms for the love of God.

"If I give him my last dry biscuit I shall have nothing left for myself," thought the soldier. He gave the old

beggar half of the third dry biscuit. Then the thought came into his head that perhaps this old beggar would meet the other two, and would learn that they had been given whole biscuits while he had only been given a half. "He will be hurt and affronted," thought the soldier, "and his blessing will be of no avail." So he gave the old beggar the other half also of the third of his three dry biscuits. "I shall get along somehow," thought the soldier, and was for making forward on his way. But the old beggar put out his hand and stopped him.

"Brother," says the old beggar, "are you in want of anything?"

"God bless you," says the soldier, looking at the beggar's rags, "I want nothing from you. You're a poor man yourself."

"Never mind my poverty," says the old beggar. "Just tell me what you would like to have, and I am well able to reward you for your kind heart."

"I don't want anything," said the soldier; "but, if you do happen to have such a thing as a pack of cards about you, I'd keep them in memory of you, and they'd be a pleasure to me on the long road."

The old beggar thrust his hand into his bosom among his rags, and pulled out a pack of cards.

"Take these," says he, "and when you play with them you'll always be winner whoever may be playing against you. And here's a flour sack for you as well. If you meet anything and want to catch it, just open the sack and tell beasts or birds or aught else to get into it, and they'll do just that, and you can close the sack and do with them what you will."

"Thank you kindly," says the soldier, throws the sack over his shoulder, puts the pack of cards in his pocket, and trudges off along the high road singing an old song.

He went on and on till he came to a lake, where he drank a little water to ease his thirst, and smoked a pipe to put off his hunger, resting by the shore of the lake. And there on the lake he saw three wild geese swimming far away. "Now if I could catch them!" thought the soldier, and remembered the sack the old beggar had given him. He opened the sack and shouted at the top of his voice: "Hi! You there, you wild geese, come into my sack!"

And the three wild geese splashed up out of the water, and flew to the bank and crowded into the sack one after the other.

The soldier tied up the mouth of the sack, flung it over his shoulder and went on his way.

He came to a town, and looked for a tavern, and chose the best he could see, and went in there and asked for the landlord.

“See here,” says he, “here are three wild geese. I want one of them roasted for my dinner. Another I’ll give you in exchange for a bottle of vodka. The third you shall have to pay you for your trouble.”

The landlord agreed, as well he might, and presently the soldier was seated at a good table near a window, with a whole bottle of the best vodka and a fine roast goose fresh from the kitchen.

When he had made an end of the goose, the soldier laid down his knife and fork, tipped the last drops of the vodka down his throat, and set the bottle upside down upon the table. Then he lit his little pipe, sat back on the bench and took a look out of the window to see what was doing in the town.

And there on the other side of the road was a fine palace, well carved and painted. A year’s work had gone to the carving of every doorpost and window-frame. But in all the palace there was not one whole pane of glass.

“Landlord,” says the soldier, “tell me what’s the meaning of this? Why is a fine palace like that standing empty with broken windows?”

“It’s a good enough palace,” says the landlord. “The Tzar built the palace for himself, but there’s no living in it because of the devils.”

“Devils?” says the soldier.

“Devils,” says the landlord. “Every night they crowd into the palace, and, what with their shouting and yelling and screaming and playing cards, and all the other devilries that come into their heads, there’s no living in the palace for decent folk.”

“And does nobody clear them out?” asks the soldier.

“Easier said than done,” says the landlord.

Well, with that the soldier wishes good health to the landlord, and sets off to see the Tzar. He comes walking into the Tzar's house and gives him a salute.

"Your Majesty," says he, "will you give me leave to spend one night in your empty palace?"

"God bless you," says the Tzar, "but you don't know what you are asking. Foolhardy folk enough have tried to spend a night in that palace. They went in merry and boasting, but not one of them came walking out alive in the morning."

"What of that?" says the soldier. "Water won't drown a Russian soldier, and fire won't burn him. I have served God and the Tzar for twenty-five years and am not dead. A single night in that palace won't be end of me."

"But I tell you: a man walks in there alive in the evening, and in the morning the servants have to search the floor for the little bits of his bones."

"None the less," says the soldier, "if your majesty will give me leave..."

"Get along with you and God be with you," says the Tzar. "Spend the night there if you've set your heart on it."

So the soldier came to the palace and stepped in, singing through the empty rooms. He made himself comfortable in the biggest room of all, laid his knapsack in a corner and hung his sword on nail, sat down at the table, took out his bag of tobacco, filled his little pipe, and sat there smoking, ready for what might come.

Twelve o'clock sharp and there was a yelling, a shouting, a blowing of horns, a scraping of fiddles and every other kind of instrument, a noise of dancing, of running, of stamping, and the palace cram full of devils making themselves at home as if the place belonged to them.

"And you, soldier?" cried the devils. "What are you sitting there so glum for, smoking your pipe? There's smoke enough where we have been. Put your pipe in your pocket and play a round of cards with us."

"Right you are," says the soldier, "if you'll play with my cards."

"Deal them out," shouted the devils, and the soldier put his pipe in his pocket and dealt out the cards, while the devils crowded round the table fighting for room on the benches.

They played a game and the soldier won. They played another and he won again. The devils were cunning

enough, God knows, but not all their cunning could win a single game for them. The soldier was raking in the money all the time. Soon enough the devils had not a penny piece between them, and the soldier was for putting up his cards and lighting his pipe. Content he was, and well he might be, with his pockets bulging with money.

“Stop a minute, soldier,” said the devils, “we’ve still got sixty bushels of silver and forty of gold.

We’ll play for them if you’ll give us time to send for them.”

“Lets see the silver,” says the soldier, and puts the cards in his pocket.

Well, they sent a little devil to fetch the silver. Sixty times he ran out of the room and sixty times he came staggering back with a bushel of silver on his shoulders.

The soldier pulled out his cards, and they played on, but it was all the same. The devils cheated in every kind of way, but could not win a game.

“Go and fetch the gold,” says the oldest devil.

“Aye, aye, grandfather,” says the little devil, and goes scuttling out of the room. Forty times he ran out, and forty times he came staggering back with a bushel of gold between his shoulders.

They played on. The soldier won every game and all the gold, asked if they had any more money to lose, put his cards in his pocket and lit his pipe.

The devils looked at all the money they had lost. It seemed a pity to lose all that good silver and gold.

“Tear him to pieces, brothers,” they cried, “tear him to pieces, eat him and have done!”

The soldier tapped his little pipe on the table.

“First make sure,” says he, “who eats whom.” And with that he whips out his sack, and, says he, to the devils, who were all gnashing their teeth and making ready to fall on him, “what do you call this?”

“It’s a sack,” said the devils.

“Is it?” says the soldier. “Then, by the word of God, get into it!”

And the next minute all those devils were tumbling over each other and getting into the sack, squeezing in one on the top of another until the last one had got inside. Then the soldier tied up the sack with a good double knot, hung it on a nail, and lay down to sleep.

In the morning the Tzar sent his servants.

“Go,” says the Tzar, “and see what has happened to the soldier who spent the night in the empty palace. If the unclean spirits have made an end of him, then you must sweep up his bones and make all clean.”

The servants came, all ready to lament for the brave soldier done to death by the unclean, and there was the soldier walking cheerfully from one room to another, smoking his little pipe.

“Well done, soldier! We never thought to see you alive. And how did you spend the night? How did you manage against the devils?”

“Devils?” says the soldier. “I wish all men I have played cards against had paid their debts so honestly. Have a look at the silver and gold I won from them. Look at the heaps of money lying on the floor.”

The servants looked at the silver and gold and touched it to see if it was real. But there was no doubt about that. I wish I had more in my pocket of the same sort.

“Now, brothers,” said the soldier, “off with you as quick as you can, go and fetch two blacksmiths here on the run. And let them bring with them an iron anvil and the two heaviest hammers in the forge.”

The servants asked no questions, but hurried to the smithy, and the two blacksmiths came running, with anvil and hammers. Giants they were, the strongest men in all the town.

“Now,” says the soldier, “take that sack from the nail and lay it on the anvil and let me see how the blacksmiths of this town can set about their work.”

The blacksmiths took the sack from the nail.

“Devil take it, what a weight,” they said to each other.

And little voices screamed out of the sack: “We are good folk. We are your own people.”

“Are you?” said the blacksmiths; and they laid the sack on the anvil and swung the great hammers, up and

down, up and down, as if they were beating out a lump of iron.

The devils fared badly in there, and worse and worse. The hammers came down as if they were going through devils, anvil, earth, and all. It was more than even devils could bear.

“Have mercy!” they screamed. “Have mercy, soldier! Let us out again into the world, and we’ll never forget you world without end. And as for this palace.... No devil shall put the nail of the toe of his foot in it. We’ll tell them all. Not one shall come within a hundred miles.”

The soldier let the blacksmiths give a few more blows, just for luck. Then he stopped them, and untied the mouth of the sack. The moment he opened it, the devils shot out, and fled away to hell without looking right or left in their hurry.

But the soldier was no fool, and he grabbed one old devil by the leg. And the devil hung gibbering, trying to get away. The soldier cut the devil’s hairy wrist to the bone, so that the blood flowed, took a pen, dipped it in the blood, and gave it to the devil. But he never let go of his leg.

“Write,” says he, “that you will be my faithful servant.”

The old devil screamed and wriggled, but the soldier gripped him tight. There was nothing to be done. He wrote and signed in his own blood a promise to serve the soldier faithfully wherever and whenever there should be need. Then the soldier let him go, and he went hopping and screaming after the others, and had disappeared in a moment.

And so the devils went rushing down to hell, aching in every bone of their hairy bodies. And they called all the other unclean spirits, old and young, big and little, and told what had happened to them. And they set sentinels all round hell, and guards at every gate, and ordered them to watch well, and, whatever they did, not on any account to let in the soldier with the flour sack.

The soldier went to the Tzar and told him how he had dealt with the devils, and how henceforth no devil would set foot within a hundred miles of the palace.

“If that’s so,” says the Tzar, “we’ll move at once, and go and live there, and you shall live with me and be honoured as my own brother.” And with that there was a great to do shifting the bedding and tables and benches and all else from the old palace to the new, and the soldier set up house with the Tzar, living with him

as his own brother, and wearing fine clothes with gold embroidery, and eating the same food as the Tzar, and as much of it as he liked. Money to spend he had, for he had won from the devils enough to last even a spending man a thousand years. And he had nothing to spend it on. Hens don't eat gold. No more do mice. And there the money lay in a corner till the soldier was tired of looking at it.

So the soldier thought he would marry. And he took a wife, and in a year's time God gave him a son, and he had nothing more to wish for except to see the son grow up and turn into a general.

But it so happened that the little boy fell ill, and what was the matter with him no one knew. He grew worse and worse from day to day, and the Tzar sent for every doctor in the country, but not one of them did him a half-pennyworth of good. The doctors grew richer and the boy grew no better but worse, as is often the way.

The soldier had almost given up hope of saving his son when he remembered the old devil who had signed a promise written in his own blood to serve the soldier faithfully wherever and whenever there should be need. He remembered this, and said to himself: "Where the devil has my old devil hidden himself all this time?"

And he had scarcely said this when suddenly there was the little old devil standing in front of him, dressed like a peasant in a little shirt and breeches, trembling with fright and asking: "How can I serve your Excellency?"

"See here," says the soldier. "My son is ill. Do you happen to know how to cure him?"

The little old devil took a glass from his pocket and filled it with cold water and set it on the sick child's forehead.

"Come here, your Excellency," says he, "and look into the glass of water."

The soldier came and looked in the glass.

"And what does your Excellency see?" asked the little old devil, who was so much afraid of the soldier that he trembled and could hardly speak.

"I see Death, like a little old woman, standing at my son's feet."

"Be easy," says the little old devil, "for if Death is standing at your son's feet he will be well again. But if Death were standing at his head then nothing could save him."

And with that the little old devil lifted the glass and splashed the cold water over the sick child, and the next

minute there was the little boy crawling about and laughing and crowing as if he had never been sick in his life.

“Give me that glass,” says the soldier, “and we’ll cry quits.”

The little old devil gave him the glass. And the soldier gave back the promise which the devil had signed in his own blood. As soon as the little old devil had that promise in his hand he gave one look at the soldier and fled away as if the blacksmiths had only that minute stopped beating him on the anvil.

And the soldier after that set up as a wise man and put all the doctors out of business, curing the boyars and generals. He would just look in his glass, and if Death stood at a sick man’s feet, he threw the water over him and cured him. If Death stood at the sick man’s head, he said: “It’s all up with you,” and the sick man died as sure as fate.

All went well until the Tzar himself fell ill and sent for the soldier to cure him.

The soldier went in, and the Tzar greeted him as his own brother, and prayed him to be quick, as he felt the sickness growing upon him as he lay. The soldier poured cold water in the glass, and set it on the Tzar’s forehead, and looked and looked again, and saw Death standing at the Tzar’s head.

“O Tzar,” says the soldier, “it’s all up with you. Death is waiting by your head, and you have but a few minutes left to live.”

“What?” cries the Tzar, “you cure my boyars and generals and you will not cure me who am Tzar, and have treated you as my own born brother. If I’ve only a few minutes to live I’ve time enough to give orders for you to be beheaded.”

The soldier thought and thought, and he begged Death: O Death,” says he, “give my life to the Tzar and kill me instead. Better to die so than to end by being shamefully beheaded!”

He looked once more in the glass, and saw that the little old woman Death had shifted from the Tzar’s head and was now standing at his feet. He picked up the glass and splashed the water over the Tzar, and there was the Tzar as well and healthy as ever he had been.

“You are my own true brother after all,” says the Tzar. “Let us go and feast together.”

But the soldier shook in all his limbs and could hardly stand, and he knew that his time was come. He prayed

Death: "O Death, give me just one hour to say good-bye to my wife and my little son."

"Hurry up!" says Death.

And the soldier hurried to his room in the palace, said good-bye to his wife, told his son to grow up and be a general, lay down on his bed and grew iller every minute.

He looked, and there was Death, a little old woman, standing by his bedside.

"Well, soldier," says Death, "you have only two minutes left to live!"

The soldier groaned, and, turning in bed, pulled the flour sack from under his pillow and opened it.

"Do you know what this is?" says he to Death.

"A sack," says Death.

"Well, if it is a sack, get into it!" says the soldier.

Death was into the sack in a moment, and the soldier leapt from his bed well and strong, tied up the sack with two double knots, flung it over his shoulder and set out for the deep forest of Brian, which is the thickest in all the world. He came to the forest and made his way into the middle of it, hung the sack from the topmost branches of a high poplar tree, left it there and came home singing songs at the top of his voice and full of all kinds of merriment.

From that time on there was no dying in the world. There were births every day, and plenty of them, but nobody died. It was a poor time for doctors. And so it was for many years. Death had come to an end, and it was as if all men would live for ever. And all the time the little old woman, Death, tied up in a sack, unable to get about her business, was hanging from the top of a tall poplar tree away in Brian forest.

And then, one day, the soldier was walking out to take the air, and he met an ancient old crone, so old and so ancient that she was like to fall whichever way the wind blew. She tottered along, blown this way and that, like a blade of withered grass.

"What an old hag," said the soldier to himself. "It was time for her to die a many years ago."

"Yes," says the old crone, with her toothless gums numbling and grumbling over her words. "Long ago it was

time for me to die. When you shut up Death in the sack I had only an hour left to live. I had done with the world, and the world had done with me, and I would have been glad to be at peace. Long ago my place in heaven was made ready, and it is empty to this day for I cannot die. You, soldier, have sinned before God and before man. You have sinned a sin that God will not forgive. I am not the only soul in the world who is tortured as I am. Mine is not the only place that is growing dusty in heaven. Hundreds and thousands of us who should have died drag on in misery about the world. And but for you we should now be resting in peace.”

The soldier began to think. And he thought of all the other old men and women he had kept from the rest that God had made ready for them. “There is no doubt about it,” thinks he; “I had better let Death loose again. No matter if I am the first of whom she makes an end. I have sinned many sins, not counting this one. Better go to the other world now and bear my punishment while I am strong, for when I am very old it will come worse to me to be tortured.”

So he set off to the forest of Brian, which is the thickest in all the world. He found the poplar tree, and saw the sack hanging from the topmost branches, swinging this way and that as wind blew.

“Well, Death, are you alive up there?” the soldier shouted against the wind.

And a little voice, hardly to be heard, answered from the sack: “Alive, little father!”

So the soldier climbed up the tree, took down the sack, and carried it home over his shoulder. He said good-bye to his wife and his son, who was now a fine young lad. Then he went into his own room, opened the bag, lay down upon the bed, and begged Death to make an end of him.

And Death, in the form of a little old woman, crept trembling out of the sack, looking this way and that, for she was very much afraid. As soon as she saw the soldier she bolted through the door, and ran away as fast as her little old legs could carry her. “The de

could carry her. “The devils can make an end of you if they like,” she shrieked, “but you don’t catch me taking a hand in it.”

The soldier sat up on the bed and knew that he was alive and well. Troubled he was as to what to do next.

Thinks he: “I’d better get straight along to hell, and let the devils throw me into the boiling pitch, and stew me until all my sins are stewed out of me.”

So he said good-bye to everybody, took his sack in his hands and set off to hell by the best road he could find.

Well, he walked on and on, over hill and valley and through the deep forest, until he came at last to the kingdom of the unclean. There were the walls of hell and the gates of hell, and as he looked he saw that sentinels were standing at every gate.

As soon as he came near a gate the devil doing sentry go calls out:

“Who goes there?”

“A sinful soul come to you to be stewed in the boiling pitch.”

[20]

“And what is that you’ve got in your hand?”

“A sack.”

And the devil yelled out at the top of his voice and gave the alarm. From all sides the unclean rushed up and began closing every gate and window in hell with strong bolts and bars.

And the soldier walked round hell outside the walls, unable to get in.

He cried out to the Prince of Hell:

“Let me into hell, I beg you. I have come to you to be tormented, because I have sinned before God and before man.”

“No,” shouted the Prince of Hell, “I won’t let you in. Go away. Go away, I tell you. Go away, anywhere you like. There’s no place for you here.”

The soldier was more troubled than ever.

“Well,” says he, “if you won’t let me in, you won’t. I’ll go away if you will give me two hundred sinful souls. I will take them to God, and perhaps, when he sees them, he will forgive me and let me into heaven.”

“I’ll throw in another fifty,” says the Prince of Hell, “if only you’ll get away from here.”

And he told the lesser devils to count out two hundred and fifty sinful souls and to let them out quickly at one of the back doors of hell, while he held the soldier in talk, so that the soldier should not slip in while the sinful souls were going out.

It was done, and the soldier set off for heaven with two hundred and fifty sinful souls behind him, marching in column of route, as the soldier made them for the sake of order and decency.

Well, they marched on and on, and in the end they came to heaven, and stopped before the very gates of Paradise.

And the holy apostles, standing in the gateway of Paradise, said: "Who are you?"

"I am the soldier who hung Death in a sack, and I have brought two hundred and fifty sinful souls from hell in hope that God will pardon my sins and let me into Paradise."

And the apostles went to the Lord, and told him that the soldier had come, and brought with him two hundred and fifty sinful souls.

And God said: "Let in the sinful souls, but do not let in the soldier."

The apostles went back to the gateway, and opened the gates and told the souls they might come in. But when the soldier tried to march in at the head of his company they stopped him, and said: "No, soldier! There's no place for you here."

So the soldier took one of the sinful souls aside and gave that soul his sack, and told him: "As soon as you are through the gates of Paradise, open the sack and shout out "Into the sack, soldier!" You will do this because I brought you here from hell."

And the sinful soul promised to do this for the soldier.

But when that sinful soul went through the gates into Paradise, for very joy it forgot about the soldier, and threw away the sack somewhere in Paradise, where it may be lying to this day.

And so the soldier, after waiting a long time, went slowly back to earth. Death would not take him. There was no place for him in Paradise and no place for him in Hell. For all I know he may be living yet.