

The Voices at the Window

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Ukrainian

Intermediate
7 min read

A nobleman went hunting one autumn, and with him went a goodly train of huntsmen. All day long they hunted and hunted, and at the end of the day they had caught nothing. At last dark night overtook them. It had now grown bitterly cold, and the rain began to fall heavily. The nobleman was wet to the skin, and his teeth chattered. He rubbed his hands together and cried, "Oh, had we but a warm hut, and a white bed, and soft bread, and sour kvas (a drink), we should have naught to complain of, but would tell tales and feign fables till dawn of day!" Immediately there shone a light in the depths of the forest. They hastened up to it, and lo! there was a hut. They entered, and on the table lay bread and a jug of kvas; and the hut was warm, and the bed therein was white--everything just as the nobleman had desired it. So they all entered after him, and said grace, and had supper, and laid them down to sleep.

They all slept, all but one, but to him slumber would not come. About midnight he heard a strange noise, and something came to the window and said, "Oh, thou son of a dog! thou didst say, 'If we had but a warm hut, and a white bed, and soft bread, and sour kvas, we should have naught to complain of, but would tell tales and feign fables till dawn'; but now thou hast forgotten thy fine promise! Wherefore this shall befall thee on thy way home. Thou shalt fall in with an apple-tree full of apples, and thou shalt desire to taste of them, and when thou hast tasted thereof thou shalt burst. And if any of these thy huntsmen hear this thing and tell thee of it, that man shall become stone to the knee!" All this that huntsman heard, and he thought, "Woe is me!"

And about the second cockcrow something else came to the window and said, "Oh, thou son of a dog! thou didst say, 'If we had but a warm hut, and a white bed, and soft bread, and sour kvas, we should have naught to complain of, but would tell tales and feign fables till dawn'; but now thou hast forgotten thy fine promises! Wherefore this shall befall thee on thy way home. Thou shalt come upon a spring by the roadside, a spring of pure water, and thou shalt desire to drink of it, and when thou hast drunk thereof thou shalt burst. But if any of these thy huntsmen hear and tell thee of this thing, he shall become stone to the girdle." All this that huntsman heard, and he thought to himself, "Woe is me!"

Again, toward the third cockcrow, he heard something else coming to the window, and it said, "Oh, thou son of a dog! thou didst say, 'If only we had a warm hut, and a white bed, and soft bread, and sour kvas, we should have naught to complain of, but would tell tales and feign fables till dawn'; but now thou hast forgotten all thy fine promises! Wherefore this shall befall thee on thy way home. Thou shalt come upon a feather-bed in the highway; a longing for rest shall come over thee, and thou wilt lie down on it, and the moment thou liest down thereon thou shalt burst. But if any of thy huntsmen hear this thing and tell it thee, he shall become stone up to the neck!" All this that huntsman heard, and then he awoke his comrades and said, "It is time to depart!" -- "Let us go then," said the nobleman.



“The huntsman rushed up and cut down the apple tree.” Illustration by E.W. Mitchell, published in *Cossack Fairy Tales and Folk-Tales* by Robert Nisbet Bain (1894), A.L. Burt Company

So on they went, and they had not gone very far when they saw an apple-tree growing by the wayside, and on it were apples so beautiful that words cannot describe them. The nobleman felt that he must taste of these apples or die; but the wakeful huntsman rushed up and cut down the apple-tree, whereupon apples and apple-tree turned to ashes. But the huntsman galloped on before and hid himself.

They went on a little farther till they came to a spring, and the water of that spring was so pure and clear that words cannot describe it. Then the nobleman felt that he must drink of that water or die; but the huntsman rushed up and splashed in the spring with his sword, and immediately the water turned to blood. The nobleman was wrath, and cried, “Cut me down that son of a dog!” But the huntsman rode on in front and hid himself.

They went on still farther till they came upon a golden bed in the highway, full of white feathers so soft and cosy that words cannot describe it. The nobleman felt that he must rest in that bed or die. Then the huntsman rushed up and struck the bed with his sword, and it turned to coal. But the nobleman was very wrath, and cried, “Shoot me down that son of a dog!” But the huntsman rode on before and hid himself.

When they got home the nobleman commanded them to bring the huntsman before him. “What hast thou done, thou son of Satan?” he cried. “I must needs slay thee!” But the huntsman said, “My master, bid them bring hither into the courtyard an old mare fit for naught but the knacker.” They brought the mare, and he mounted it and said, “My master, last midnight something came beneath the window and said, ‘Oh, son of a dog! thou saidst, “If only we had a warm hut, and a white bed, and soft bread, and sour kvas, we should grieve no more, but tell tales and feign fables till dawn,” and now thou hast forgotten thy promise. Wherefore this shall befall thee on thy way home: thou shalt come upon an apple-tree covered with apples by the wayside, and straightway thou shalt long to eat of them, and the moment thou tastest thereof thou shalt burst. And if any of thy huntsmen hears this thing, and tells thee of it, he shall become stone up to the knee.’” When the huntsman had spoken so far, the horse on which he sat became stone up to the knee. Then he went on, “About the second cockcrow something else came to the window and said the selfsame thing, and prophesied, ‘He shall come

upon a spring by the roadside, a spring of pure water, and he shall long to drink thereof, and the moment he tastes of it he shall burst; and whoever hears and tells him of this thing shall become stone right up to the girdle.” And when the huntsman had spoken so far, the horse on which he sat became stone right up to the breast. And he continued, and said, “About the third cockcrow something else came to the window and said the selfsame thing, and added, “This shall befall thy lord on his way home. He shall come upon a white bed on the road, and he shall desire to rest upon it, and the moment he rests upon it he shall burst; and whoever hears and tells him of this thing shall become stone right up to the neck!” And with these words he leaped from the horse, and the horse became stone right up to its neck. “That therefore, my master, was why I did what I did, and I pray thee pardon me.”

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