TALES

FROM

M. SALTYKOV-SHCHEDRIN





М.Е. САЛТЫ КОВ-ЩЕДРИ Н



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FROM M.SALTYKOV-SHCHEDRIN

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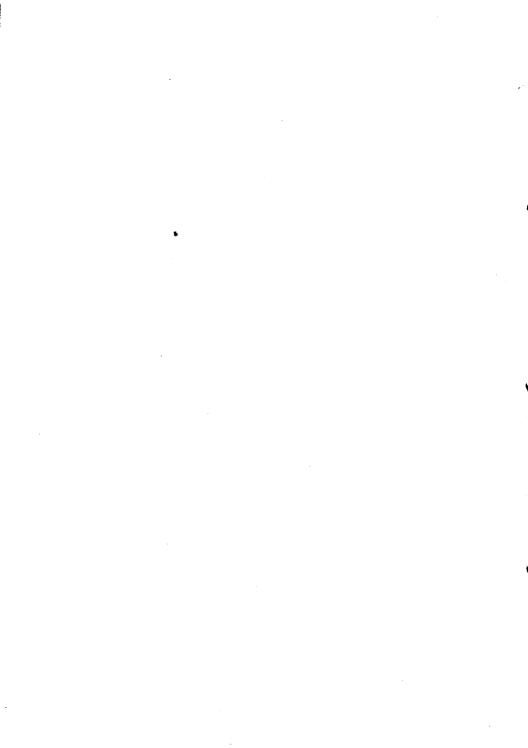
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HOW ONE PLAIN PEASANT FED TWO HIGH OFFICIALS

Once upon a time there lived two high officials, and so featherbrained were they that, hey presto!—they found themselves on a desert island.

Now, the two officials had served all their life in a certain registry. There they had been registered at birth, and there, too, they had grown to manhood and reached old age. And so it was quite natural that they did not understand a thing. All the words they knew were "Accept assurances..." and so on.

After a while, on the grounds of its uselessness, the registry was abolished, and our officials were discharged. They took up

their abode in Podyacheskaya Street in St. Petersburg, each in separate lodgings, with his own housekeeper and his pension. But then, as we have said, they suddenly found themselves on a desert island. They woke up in the morning and to their astonishment they found themselves lying side by side under the same blanket. Of course, they could not make head or tail of it at first, just talked away as if nothing had happened.

"Bless my soul, Your Excellency, I've had such a strange

dream! I dreamt I was stranded on a desert island."

The words were barely out of his mouth when up he jumped, followed post-haste by his companion.

"Goodness! What on earth has happened? Where are we?"

they gasped in horror.

And they both felt each other to make sure that they weren't

dreaming.

But try as they might to believe that it was nothing more than a dream, they were forced to accept the hard facts as they were. On the one hand, the sea rolled before them; on the other, a tiny bit of land with the same boundless sea extending beyond. And now, for the first time since leaving the registry, our two officials burst into tears. They began to look each other over: they were both in night-shirts, and each had an Order dangling from his neck.

"What wouldn't I give for a cup of coffee," sighed one of them, but immediately recalled the terrible thing that had

happened to them and burst out sobbing again.

"What on earth shall we do?" he exclaimed through his tears. "To write a report now would hardly do any good."

"Do you know what," said the other, "you, Your Excellency, go east, and I'll go west, and let's both meet here in the everyone."

ning. Maybe we shall hit on something."

For a long time they were busy trying to find east and west. But all in vain. At last one of them remembered their Chief once saying that if you wanted to find east, you should face north and you'd find it on your right. So they started to

search for the north. This way they turned and that, trying all the points of the compass, but, having spent their lives in a

registry, they just couldn't find anything.

"Look here, Your Excellency, you go to the right, I'll go to the left. It will be better that way!" said the other official, who besides serving at the registry had once taught calligraphy at a school for soldiers' orphans, and because of this had a bit more sense.

No sooner said than done. One went to the right and saw tall trees with all kinds of fruit. The official longed to taste one of the apples. But they were so high that he could not reach them from the ground. He attempted to climb a tree, but the only result was a torn night-shirt. Then he came to a stream and found it teeming with fish, just like the fish-pond on the Fontanka. "Ah, if only I had fish like that in my rooms at Podyacheskaya!" So he thought, and his mouth watered at the sight.

He walked on until he came to a wood, and there he saw the whistling hazel grouse, the mating woodcook and rabbits scampering among the trees.

"My goodness! What an abundance of food!" he muttered, in the agony of hunger, but willy-nilly, he had to go back emptynanded. The other high official was waiting for him.

"Well, Your Excellency, any luck?"

"No, none at all. The only thing I found was an old copy of Moskovskiye Vedomosti!"*

However it was, the officials lay down again, but hunger drove sleep away. Troubles of all kinds filled their minds. Who, they wondered, would draw their pensions for them, or they would recall the fruit, fish and fowl they had seen during the day.

"Who would have thought, Your Excellency, that man's

^{*} Moskovskiye Vedomosti—a newspaper published in Moscow (1756).
—Ed.

daily food in its original state flies in the air, swims in water and grows on trees?" one of them wondered aloud.

"Yes," responded the other, "I must confess, I always thought that rolls are born just as they appear on the breakfast table."

"It seems, therefore, that if one wants partridge for dinner one must first trap, then kill and pluck it, and then have it roasted. But how the deuce does one do all that?"

"Exactly, how is it all done?" echoed the other.

They fell silent and tried to sleep, but hunger made it useless. Visions of partridge, turkey and sucking pig fairly danced before their eyes—juicy, nicely browned, with cucumbers, pickles and salad.

"I believe I could eat my own boot now," said one high official.

"Yes, gloves aren't bad, either, especially if well-worn."

Suddenly the two glared at each other. An evil light gleamed in their eyes, they gnashed their teeth and deep growls came from their throats. Slowly they crept towards each other, and in a moment tore at each other in a rage. Shreds of clothing flew in all directions, and never was there such howling and snarling. The official who had taught calligraphy bit off and swallowed his colleague's Order. But the sight of blood had a sobering effect on them.

"Good heavens!" they exclaimed in one breath. "If we go on like that, we'll eat each other!"

"Ah me, however did we get here? I'd like to know what scoundrel has played this trick on us?"

"Your Excellency," suggested one of the officials, "I feel we ought to divert ourselves by conversation, otherwise there'll be murder here."

"You begin," replied the other.

"Well, for instance, why, in your view, does the sun first rise and then set, and not the other way round?" "How odd you are, Your Excellency! Don't you also first rise, then walk to the office and then only go to bed?"

"But why not reverse the order? Why not go to bed first,

dream all sorts of dreams and then get up?"

"H'm... yes... er.... But I must confess that when I served at the registry I always thought of it in this way: now it's morning, then it'll be day and afterwards they'll serve dinner and I'll go to bed!"

The reference to dinner, however, cast a gloom over them and broke the conversation at the very outset.

It was resumed by one of them saying: "I once heard a doctor say that a man can live on his own juices for a long time."

"How is that?"

"Well, it's something like this. Your own juices are believed to produce other juices, and those, in their turn, produce still others. And so on till all the juices end."

"And what then?"

"Then you must take food."

"D—!"

In short, no matter what the subject was it always brought memories of food, and that whetted their appetite more and more. They resolved to give up talking, and recalling the copy of the *Moskovskiye Vedomosti*, eagerly began to read it.

"Yesterday," one of them read in a tremulous voice, "His Honour the Governor of our ancient metropolis gave an official dinner. The table was laid for one hundred guests with a luxury that baffles description. The dainties of all countries seemed to have had a rendezvous at this magnificent feast: the golden sterlet of the Sheksna was seen alongside the pheasant of the Caucasian forests, and strawberries of a delicacy seldom seen in our northern climes in this grim month of February."

"For goodness' sake, Your Excellency, can't you find another subject?" cried the other in desperation, and, snatching the paper from his comrade, read the following:

"Our special correspondent writes from Tula: yesterday evening, to celebrate the hooking of a sturgeon in the River Upa (an event beyond the memory even of the oldest resident, especially since the sturgeon was identified as police inspector B.), the local club held a fête. The hero of the day was borne in on a huge wooden platter, encircled by cucumbers and with a sprig of lettuce in its mouth. Doctor P., as master of ceremonies, took special care that everyone should receive his share. The sauces were of such a variety as to suit almost every taste."

"Excuse me, Your Excellency, but you're not very careful either in your choice of subjects," broke in the first high official, and taking the paper in his turn, began to read:

"Your Vyatka correspondent reports that one of the oldest local residents has evolved the following original recipe for making fish soup. Take a live turbot, first whip it soundly, and when its liver is sufficiently enlarged with distress..."

The two high officials hung their heads. Everything they cast their eyes on was associated with food. Their very thoughts, as it were, conspired against them, for try as they would to exorcize the vision of beefsteak, the image made its way into their minds by sheer force.

But suddenly the high official who had taught calligraphy got an idea.

"I say, Your Excellency," he exclaimed joyfully, "what if we could find a muzhik?"

"A muzhik? What do you mean?"

"Why, sir, just an ordinary muzhik, the sort you meet anywhere. He could get us rolls and catch fish and grouse in no time!"

"H'm... a muzhik.... But where is he to be had? There are none about."

"How can you say that, Your Excellency? There are plenty of muzhiks everywhere. You've only to search weil. I'm sure



he's lolling about somewhere this very moment, trying to dodge work."

The thought was so comforting to the high officials that they jumped up and set off in search of a muzhik.

For a long time they roamed the island without success. But at last the pungent smell of chaffy bread and ill-cured sheepskin set them on the right trail. And there, sleeping under a tree, with his belly upwards and his fist beneath his head, they found a huge, hulking muzhik, quite obviously and audaciously shirking work. Their indignation knew no bounds.

"What, sleeping, you lazybones?" they fell upon him. "Here are two officials starving to death, and he won't lift a finger! Off with you to work this minute!" The muzhik rose to his feet and saw that this was no joking matter. These were very stern officials. At first he wanted to show them his heels, but they pounced on him and held on like grim death. After that he got busy.

First he climbed up an apple-tree, plucked a dozen of the ripest apples for the officials, and took a sour one for himself. Then he dug in the earth and produced a few potatoes. After that he rubbed two pieces of wood together and obtained fire. Then of his own hair he made a net and caught a grouse. Finally, he kindled a fire and cooked such a variety of good things that it even occurred to the officials that they might spare a morsel for the lazy lout, too.

They looked on at the peasant's labours, and their officials' hearts became light and gay. They had already forgotten that they had nearly died of starvation the day before; their only thought now was "Ah, how wonderful to be a high official—you will never perish anywhere."

"Are you satisfied, Your Excellencies?" asked the lazybones meanwhile.

"Very much so indeed, good fellow, we can see that you are doing your best."