

King Och

Once upon a time, long ago, there lived a poor peasant with his wife. They had only one child—a son—and he wasn't as he should be. He was lazy and never did anything, but just sat near the stove and slept on the ledge. He was already about twenty years old and he wouldn't even bother to get dressed. When they gave him food to eat he ate it; if they didn't give him any, he went without. His father and mother worried.

“What are we going to do with you since you are not good at doing anything? Other children are a help to their parents but you just eat our bread for nothing.” But the son wasn't concerned with that. He just sat and slept on the stove ledge.

One day the mother said, “What shall we do with him, husband? He has now reached manhood and is so stupid he can't do anything. Maybe you should give him away, or else hire him out. Perhaps strangers will teach him something.” They agreed, and the father apprenticed him to a tailor to be trained. Well, he remained there about three days and then ran away. He came home, went to the stove and fell asleep on the ledge.

His father beat him soundly and scolded him. Then he gave him to a shoemaker to teach him shoemaking, but the fellow ran away from there, too. The father again beat him and gave him to a blacksmith to train. He did not stay there long, either, but ran back home. The father then said, “What is to be done? I shall take the lazy fellow to another kingdom where I'll hire him out. Maybe he won't run away from there.”

So he took him and led him off. They walked and walked. Whether it was far or near we do not know, but they finally entered such a forest so dark that there was only the sky and earth to be seen. They came out of the forest somewhat tired and there near the pathway stood a burnt stump

of a tree. The father said, "I'm tired, so I'll just sit down and rest a little." So he sat on the stump and said, "Och, how tired I am!"

He had just uttered these words when from that stump there climbed out a little old man, all wrinkled, with a green beard down to his knees. "What do you want, O man, from me?" he said. The peasant was amazed. Where did such a wonder come from? So he said to the little old man, "I didn't call you, did I? Get away from me and leave me alone!"

"What do you mean you didn't call me, when you did!" said the little old man.

"Who, then, are you?" asked the peasant.

"I am Och, King of the Forest," he replied. "Why did you call me?"

"What do you mean? I didn't call you!"

"You did call me. You said 'Och.'"

"Well, I was tired and so I said, 'Och, how tired I am!'"

"Where are you going, then?" asked Och.

"The world lies before my eyes," replied the peasant, "and I am taking this youth out into the world to hire. Maybe strangers will teach him reason, because at home, whenever I hire him, he runs away."

"Hire him out to me," said Och. "I'll teach him, but only on this condition. After he has stayed a year, you may come to get him. If you recognize him you may have him, but if you don't, then he will have to stay with me another year."

"Agreed," said the man. They shook hands and had a drink to close the bargain. The peasant went home by himself and the son went off with King Och.

He led him off to the world beneath the earth and finally brought him to a little green house where rushes and reeds flowed around. And in the little house everything was green: the ceiling was green and the benches were green. Och's wife and children were green, too. To tell the truth, *everything* was green. For servants Och had wood nymphs, and they were as green as the rest. "Well," said Och at last, "sit down, servant and have a bite to eat."

The nymphs gave him a few dishes and all the food was green. After the youth had eaten, Och said, "Go now, servant. Chop down some wood and bring it here."

The servant went. Whether he chopped or did not chop the wood is not known, but he lay on top of some wood and fell asleep. Och came and found him sleeping. He commanded his servants to bring some wood. He bound the sleeping servant on top of the wood and burned the wood. The servant was burned up, too. Och then took the cinders and threw them to the winds, but one coal fell from the cinders. Och sprinkled the coal with living water and the servant became alive again, only now he was a little more alert.

Och again commanded the servant to chop some wood and once more he fell asleep. Och set fire to the wood and burned up the servant. He threw the cinders to the winds, sprinkled one coal with living water and the servant again became alive—and now was so fair that there wasn't anyone more handsome. Then Och set fire to him a third time and again he sprinkled the coal with living water and that lazy youth became such an alert and fine Cossack that you can't imagine.

So the youth stayed a year. When the year ran out the father came for his son. He entered the forest, approached the burnt stump and said, "Och!" Och climbed out of the stump. The father said, "Good day, Och."

“And what do you want, O man?” asked Och.

“I have come for my son,” he said.

“Well, let’s go. If you recognize him, take him with you. If you don’t recognize him, he must serve me another year.” The man went with Och, who brought him to the green house. Then Och searched and brought out a measure of millet that he poured out, and there came running goodness knows how many roosters!

“Well, do you recognize your son?” asked Och. The man looked. All the roosters were the same, one like the other. He didn’t know his own.

“Well,” said Och. “Since you did not recognize your son, he will have to serve me another year.” And the peasant went home.

So another year went by. Then the man again went to Och. He approached the stump. “Och!” he said. Och climbed up onto the stump.

“Let’s go,” he said, “and see if you recognize your son!” He led him to a sheepfold where there were some rams that all looked alike. The man tried to identify his son, but he couldn’t.

“Go home then, if that’s the case. Your son must serve me another year.”

The peasant went off, worried.

The third year passed by and then the peasant set off to see Och. He walked and walked until he met an old man all white like milk. Even his clothes were white. “Good day to you, O man,” said the old white man.

“Good day to you, Grandpa,” replied the peasant.

“Where are you going?”

“I am going to Och, to rescue my son,” replied the peasant.

“Why is that?”

“Thus and so,” replied the peasant. And he told the old man how he had given Och his son as a servant and on what terms.

“Eh, eh,” said the old man. “This is bad. He will fool you for a long time.”

“Well, I see that already,” replied the peasant. “But I do not know what to do now. Do you, Grandpa, know how to identify my son?”

“I do know,” said the old man.

“Tell me then, dear old fellow, because no matter what, he is my son.”

“Listen, then,” said the old man. “When you come to Och he will let fly some doves. Do not take any dove except the one that does not eat, but sits by himself under the pear tree and preens his feathers. That is your son.” The man thanked the old man and went off. He came to the stump.

“Och!” he said.

Och climbed out to him and led him off to his forest kingdom. There Och scattered a measure of wheat and called some doves. A whole flock flew in and every one was like the other.

“Identify your son,” said Och. “If you do so, he is yours. If you don’t, he is mine.”

All the doves were eating wheat except one who sat beneath a pear tree by himself. He puffed himself out as he sat preening his feathers. And the peasant said, “Here is my son.”

“Well, you guessed correctly, so you may take him,” said Och. He went and touched the dove and he became such a fine youth that there wasn’t a finer one in the world. The father rejoiced greatly. He embraced him and kissed him. They were both glad to see each other. “Let us go home, son,” said the peasant. So off they went.

They went along the road and began to talk. The father asked the youth how it was at Och's place and the son told him all about his adventures. Then the father told the son how poor they were. The son listened and then the father continues, "What are we going to do now, my son? I am poor and you are poor. You served for three years, but earned nothing!"

"Do not worry, father. Things will come out right. Look," he said. "Some young noblemen are going to hunt here, so I shall turn myself into a hound and catch a fox. The young noblemen will buy me from you and you will sell me for three hundred rubles. But sell me without the leash. Then we shall have some money and we shall get established."

They went on for awhile until they happened upon a scene such as the son had described. On the outskirts of the forest some dogs were chasing a fox. They raced and raced after the animal, but the dogs could not catch up with him. The youth then turned into a hound. He ran after the fox and caught it. The young noblemen jumped out of the forest. "Is this your hound?" they asked.

"Yes, it is mine," said the peasant.

"It is a good hound. Sell him to us."

"You may buy him."

"What are you asking for him?"

"Three hundred rubles, without the leash."

"What do we want with a leash? We will make him a gilded one. Here are one hundred rubles."

"No," said the peasant.

"Well, take the money and give us the hound."

They counted over the money, took the hound and continued to hunt. They let the hound go again after a fox. The hound chased it into the forest, where he changed back into a youth and

then returned to his father. They went on and on and the father said, “What is this money to us? We can only buy a farm and repair our house for it.”

“Do not worry, father. We shall get more. Soon, father, the young noblemen will hunt for quail with a falcon, so I shall turn myself into a falcon. They will want to buy me, so you will sell me for three hundred rubles, without my little hood.”

So they went along a field where the young noblemen released a falcon after the quail. The falcon chased the quail, which ran off. It tried very hard to catch the quail but it always managed to escape. The youth then turned himself into a falcon and in a short time managed to catch the quail. The young noblemen saw this and said to the peasant, “Is that your falcon?”

“Yes, it is mine.”

“Sell it to us.”

“Make a bid for it,” replied the peasant.

“What do you want for him?”

“If you give me three hundred rubles you may have the falcon, but without the hood.”

“We shall make him a brocaded hood,” said the noblemen. So they haggled over the price and finally settled on three hundred rubles. The young noblemen let the falcon go after the quail, but instead it flew into the forest where it turned back into a youth who again came back to his father.

“Well now, we have grown a little bit richer,” said the father.

“Wait a bit, father. We shall gain more riches,” replied the youth. “When we go through the marketplace I shall turn into a horse, and you will sell me. They will give you one thousand rubles—only sell me without the halter.”

So they approached a little town and went through the marketplace. The son changed into a horse—a horse as fierce as a dragon, and who pranced about vigorously. The father led the horse by the halter and the horse beat the ground forcefully with his hooves. Then some buyers gathered around and they began to bargain.

“A thousand rubles without the halter is the price,” said the father.

“What do we want with his halter? We shall make the horse a silver one. Here is five hundred rubles.”

“No,” replied the peasant.

Just then, who should come by but a gypsy who was blind in one eye. “What do you want for the horse, my man?”

“A thousand rubles without the halter.”

“Eh, that’s too dear. Take five hundred rubles with the halter.”

“No, no. Go away,” said the peasant.

“Well, here is six hundred rubles,” replied the gypsy. They bargained and bargained, but the peasant wouldn’t accept a half kopek less.

“I’ll take it, governor,” said the gypsy, “but with the halter.”

“No, gypsy. The halter is mine.”

“My dear good man. Did you ever see them lead a horse without a halter? It is impossible to lead a horse without one.”

“Do what you want, but the halter is mine,” said the man.

“Well, governor. I shall throw in five rubles more, only with the halter.”

The peasant thought to himself, “The halter is worth only thirty kopek pieces and the gypsy is giving me five rubles.” So he agreed and gave it to him. They sealed the bargain with a drink.

The peasant took the money and went home and the gypsy rode off with the horse. Now in reality, this was Och turned into a gypsy.

The horse carrying Och rode on and on, higher than the trees, lower than the clouds. They descended into the forest and arrived at Och’s place. He put the horse into the stable and he went into the house. “He couldn’t get away from me, the bad fellow,” he said to his wife.

Now, at lunch hour Och took his horse by the reins and led him to the river to drink. He had just reached the river when the horse bent his head to drink. Suddenly the animal turned into a perch and swam away. Och didn’t waste time: he turned himself into a pike and began to chase after the perch. When the pike swam after him, the perch would stick out his fins and with his tail he would turn over and the pike couldn’t catch him. So the pike said:

“Perch, O perch, turn your head this way

I want talk with you, I pray.”

“I can hear you this way,” said the perch.

Again the pike said:

“Perch, O perch, turn your head this way

I want to talk with you, I pray.”

And the perch spread his fins and said, “If you want to talk, fire away. I can hear you.” The pike went on chasing the perch, but he couldn’t overtake him.

At last the perch reached the shore where a princess was washing clothes. The perch turned into a garnet ring with a gold mounting. The princess saw it and took up the ring from the water. She brought it home and said, "See what a pretty ring I found, father."

The father admired it. The princess did not know on which finger to put it, it was so pretty.

Shortly after, the servants reported to the king that some kind of merchant had made his appearance. The merchant was really Och changed into a merchant. The king came out.

"What do you want, little old man?"

"I was sailing by ship over the sea and I was taking a garnet ring to the king of my own country and I dropped it into the water. Did anyone find it?"

"Yes," said the king. "My daughter found it." So they called the princess and Och begged her to return the ring to him, but she refused to do so. Finally the father stepped in.

"Return the ring, O daughter, because if you don't ill luck will befall this man. Return it to the man!"

And Och begged her, "Whatever you want, take from me. Only return the ring to me!"

"Well, if that's the case," said the princess, "then you won't have it, nor shall I!" And she threw the ring on the ground.

The ring turned into millet that scattered over the whole house. Och didn't wait his time. He turned into a rooster and began to peck the millet. He pecked and pecked. He ate everything. But one grain of millet rolled under the foot of the princess and Och didn't find that one grain. When he finished pecking he flew through the window and off he went.

And from that grain of millet came a youth so handsome that when she saw him the princess fell in love with him at once. She earnestly begged the king and queen to give her to the youth in marriage. "I won't be happy with anyone else. He is my happiness and fortune," she said.

The king knit his brow for a long time. "How can I give you to an ordinary youth, my daughter?" But at last he agreed and gave his blessings and they became engaged. There was such a merry wedding to which everyone was asked.

I was there, too, and drank mead wine. Even though it was not in my mouth it trickled down my chin and that is why it turned white!