

Gifts of Three Seeds

In a certain village there once lived a great landowner. He had so many fields, woods, cattle and all kinds of property that even the emperor was envious of him. A poor man called Maxim worked for him. This servant lived in a hut with only one window. The wind used to tear the straw from the roof and when rain fell, water ran down the walls. In the hut lived Maxim's large family, who had nothing to eat.

Spring arrived and it was time to plant, but there was no seed in the grain sack. His wife was very worried and began to weep. "People have already done their planting, and we haven't even done the ploughing. Do something, husband, or we won't survive to see another year."

"Don't worry," replied Maxim. "I'll go and see the landowner and ask him to lend us a little seed. We'll plant it and next year we'll have our own."

"Well, get a move on, and don't waste time!"

So Maxim hurried off to see the landowner. He stood before the threshold and said, "Honorable sir, I haven't any seed to plant my piece of land. Lend me at least a little seed so that my children won't starve."

The squire stared at him and shouted, "If you want something, go and work for it!"

"But I do work for you—day and night."

"You big loafer, don't talk such nonsense!" Maxim's head drooped and he returned home. He told his wife what the landowner had said to him.

Outside the sun shone warmly. The birds had flown back from warmer climes. Everywhere there was happiness. Maxim sat with his wife on the bench outside the hut and worried because their numerous children were hungry and ill. Suddenly two swallows flew by toward Maxim's house

and started to build a little nest under the eaves of the thatched roof. Maxim observed and said, “Poor little swallows. Why are you building your wee nest under such broken-down eaves? Don’t you realize that the rain will drown your children?” But the swallows didn’t understand human speech, and if they did they kept silent. They built a small nest, lined it with feathers, laid some eggs and hatched out a brood of little ones. Around Maxim’s hut it became so cheerful that everyone was happy.

But one day a terrible dragon appeared from somewhere and he began to approach the little nest of swallows. The children cried out, “Father, some kind of a dragon is climbing toward the swallows!” Maxim ran outside, grabbed hold of a cudgel and a fight to the death started up. The dragon soon fell with a bang onto his backbone and he fractured it. He scarcely managed to drag himself away and perished in a dark gully. During the battle three swallow fledglings were killed, but the fourth escaped with a broken leg. Maxim carried the wee bird into the house. The children cared for it, and when it was able to fly they gave it its freedom so that it could look for its mother and father.

Summer went by and autumn set in. The swallows flew to warmer regions but the north was covered with a blanket of snow. In time winter passed and the birds returned home to their own little nests.

In the hut of Maxim there was complete destitution so that the family had scarcely enough strength to breathe. Suddenly a lonely wee swallow was heard to strike the window with its wing. Maxim went outside and asked, “What do you want, dear little bird?”

The swallow dropped some kind of seed onto Maxim’s palm and chirped, “Sow this in front of your door.” Then it flew off. Soon it returned with a second seed and said to Maxim, “Sow this

under the window.” It fluttered off again and soon returned with a third seed, saying, “Sow this near the well.”

Maxim thanked the swallow nicely and did as told. He sowed the three seeds and began to wait for the harvest. The next morning the children woke up and ran off into the sun, but they quickly returned to the house, somewhat upset. “Father, something wonderful has grown near the house, but goodness knows what it is!”

“You must be walking in your sleep,” said the father.

“No father. Just look!” Maxim came out and saw in front of the threshold, under the window and near the well—three huge pumpkins. He wanted to lift them up, but no way: the strength of a giant was needed. The pumpkins were already ripe and shone like the sun.

“Dear wife,” said Maxim joyfully. “Please light a fire in the stove and cook some pumpkin porridge for lunch.”

He rolled one pumpkin into the house and sharpened his knife. When he cut it into halves he couldn’t believe what he saw. Inside were white bread, buns, cheese, meat, sausage, bacon, cooked food, fried food, sweet, sour and bitter food. And also a flask of rum. Maxim placed all the goods on the table and still there was more in the pumpkin.

When everybody had eaten their fill, his wife covered the magic pumpkin with a white towel.

Then Maxim rolled another one into the house. He cut it into halves and found clothes so fine that even the greatest lords had never seen anything like them before. There were silk shirts, new shirts, all kinds of skirts, necklaces and coral beads. There was everything that Maxim, his wife and children had wanted. The wife began to weep with joy and covered the pumpkin with a pretty tablecloth.

Then Maxim rolled the third pumpkin into the house. He cut it open and was startled, for from it there poured out a whole pile of gold. He filled a trunk of gold and his wife covered the pumpkin with a cloth.

“Now, my dear little children, you won’t starve and I won’t have to bow down to that greedy landowner,” said Maxim cheerfully. He dressed his children nicely and with his wife he went about the village like a rich lord, not a pauper. Within several days he started to build himself a home.

People were amazed to see such prosperity at Maxim’s. Someone told the landowner and he came to visit, saying, “Tell me, Maxim. Where did you get such riches?”

“Sir, I do not steal and nobody worked for me. All you see a little swallow brought to me.” And he related all that had happened to him.

The landowner listened to Maxim and returned to his palace. The wish to become still richer bothered him. He made a swallow’s nest under the eaves of the palace and began to entice the birds. And somehow it happened that two swallows were attracted to the place. They flew into the next, laid some eggs and began to hatch them. When the little swallows appeared and were grown a bit, the landowner set out to find a dragon, but no dragon appeared. This made the rich man very angry. The swallows would soon fly off and nobody would be able to catch them.

Soon he set up a ladder and climbed up to the nest. Instead of the dragon, he himself killed the fledglings and he broke the leg of the remaining one. He carried this bird to the palace and looked after it the whole summer.

In the autumn he let it go so that it could fly to the south. Autumn and winter passed. Spring arrived and the birds returned from the south. To the windows the swallow came flying. The rich man ran out and asked it, “What kind of gift did you bring me, little swallow?”

She gave him three seeds and warbled, “Sow these in front of the door, under the window and near the well.”

“Thank you, little bird. Now I’ll become richer than the emperor himself.”

Three huge pumpkins also grew for the rich man. He seized a broad axe with which to strike them one by one and cut them open in halves. From the first one unexpectedly there flew out a swarm of locusts. They rushed toward his grain fields and ate everything that grew there. He cut open the second pumpkin and from it a fire exploded. At first the palace of the rich man began to burn and then all his property. He didn’t even finish cutting the third pumpkin. People say that in it was a nest of snakes that will come out when the rich man returns and decides to lord it over other people. As for Maxim, he lived a long time and never had any more worries.