

VLADIMIR GRECHINOV

KHATUNA.

The girl with the doll



VLADIMIR GRECHINOV KHATUNA. THE GIRL WITH THE DOLL

*http://www.litres.ru/pages/biblio_book/?art=65961301
ISBN 9785005511713*

Аннотация

The end of the XIX century. A small village of Petrovskoye, lost in the south of the boundless Russian Empire. One rainy evening, a local blacksmith, Nazar, finds an orphan girl on a deserted road, whom he takes home. From this moment on, mysterious events begin to occur in the district. To solve them, a young detective Ledokhovsky is sent to Petrovskoye. He will have to find out what is behind everything that happened and how it is connected with an ancient legend...

Содержание

PART I	5
CHAPTER 1. PETROVSKOYE VILLAGE	5
CHAPTER 2. NAZAR	9
CHAPTER 3. A MEETING	17
CHAPTER 4. AN INCIDENT ON THE MOUNTAIN	25
CHAPTER 5. THE FORTUNE-TELLER	33
CHAPTER 6. AN ANCIENT LEGEND	39
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	43

KHATUNA. THE GIRL WITH THE DOLL

VLADIMIR GRECHINOV

Dedicated to my daughter Victoria.

© VLADIMIR GRECHINOV, 2021

ISBN 978-5-0055-1171-3

Created with Ridero smart publishing system

PART I

CHAPTER 1. PETROVSKOYE VILLAGE

This terrible story happened at the end of the XIX century in the village of Petrovskoye, Stavropol province, in the south of the vast Russian Empire. This village was lost in a steppe area, surrounded by mountains and hills with streams and beams overgrown with dense forest. Mostly Cossacks, gypsies and other newcomers who arrived here long ago in search of refuge and a better life lived in Petrovskoye. More than a dozen years passed before the village grew: adobe huts covered with straw and dry reeds, with small windows and a necessarily carved porch appeared here and there, gradually forming long, though not very slender strings. Over time, they grew into wide streets, buried in the lush greenery of trees and shrubs that planted caring villagers around their huts. There were no special attractions in Petrovskoye, except for a large white-stone church – the ringing of its bells was usually heard for many miles, and a colorful market, which everyone here called in the southern manner – the bazaar.

On weekdays, the local people were busy with something:

some with hard peasant labor in the field, and some with no less light housework, looking after the children, whom there was a lot of in the local families, and caring for the farm. On Sundays and holidays, people put on their best clothes and in the morning went first to the church, and then to the bazaar.

The trading rows were not only a meeting place for relatives and acquaintances – many came here, so to speak, to show themselves and to look at others. This was especially true of girls: local beauties at a conversation seemed to accidentally boast of new clothes to each other, while they loudly laughed and glanced furtively at the handsome lads walking in the bazaar. Here, boys scurried around in dirty tatters everywhere: some tried to earn some money honestly, attempting to bring something to sellers or visitors to the bazaar, while others simply looked for something to steal from inattentive and slow-moving buyers.

The bazaar itself was a square with the trading rows, where they sold everything what was needed. Eh, what wasn't there – fruits, vegetables, milk, eggs, meat, fish, hay, firewood, coal, clothes... They traded mainly from carts and wagons, while some placed their goods right on the ground.

The wealthy merchants and other successful businessmen had their own covered shops with large signs on which the names of the artels¹ were flaunted. Such rich men allowed themselves to hire salespeople and barkers who loudly bellowed at the whole

¹ Artel was any of various cooperative associations in the Russian Empire.

bazaar.

The owners themselves spent almost the entire market day in the immediately located inn, on the verandah of which they gathered at a large long table with a samovar.² Being business people, merchants argued about something noisily, made bets and big deals by their standards. Meanwhile, lackeys rushed to the table with sturgeons, dumplings, overseas fruits and other dishes. Finished with business, the merchants celebrated, had fun, but sometimes still looked at their pocket gold watch and watched hired salesmen, giving them instructions through the clerk or through the boy footman, who hung around the Inn.

In a word, life in the village was boiling on Sunday market day. It was a kind of holiday, after which the streets were empty, and on the morning of the next day the week of heavy peasant workdays began again...

² Samovar is a big metal container used in Russia to boil water for making tea.



CHAPTER 2. NAZAR

Once on such a Sunday a local craftsman Nazar was about to go to the bazaar. He and his wife Galina and two daughters, Ulyana and Vasilisa, eight and six years old, lived on the outskirts of the village, in a hut standing alone on the slope of a high hill. They had no special wealth: a small piece of land, a horse, chickens, and goats.

Nazar basically made his living by blacksmithing and tinsmithing. Local Cossacks and peasants ordered from him horseshoes for horses, various tools and all kinds of utensils. In addition, Nazar had an oral agreement with two traders. One of them – Pantelei – took orders from the local rich, of whom there were many in the surrounding villages and farms. They ordered mainly tin roofs, drainpipes for stone houses, monograms and weathercocks. Pantelei, in turn, selected workers who could perform this work qualitatively so as not to offend a valuable client, and as cheaply as possible so as not to offend himself. The second regular customer of Nazar was Klementiy – the clerk of the merchant Ipatiy Petrovich Volobaev, a very rich man by local standards who had several shops in the bazaar with various goods, including French chocolate that was unusual for those places, which he delivered by a long way directly from France. At the same time, Volobaev was also listed as a leader of the local merchants, for which he

enjoyed honor and respect in the village. Nazar usually brought Klementiy bright tin boxes of different sizes with coinage on the lids, in which then the chocolate was packed. Each box had an embossed stamp with the name of the artel of the merchant Volobaev.

Getting up early in the morning, Nazar first fed his livestock and had breakfast with his family, and then harnessed a horse and put in a cart all the goods he had made to order for the week. The smith was already about to hit the road, when suddenly his eldest daughter Ulyana ran out onto the porch.

«Daddy, daddy, take me with you! I also want to go to the bazaar! I'm bored of sitting at home.»

Nazar stopped his horse and frowned at her, «You don't have to hang around in the bazaar. Stay and help mom around the house!»

«Daddy, please, take me with you,» persisted Ulyana. «I'll do all the housework afterward.»

Nazar glanced at his wife, who only shrugged, as if leaving the decision to her husband. He smiled at his daughter and waved her hand, allowing her to get into the cart. Then, pulling the reins, he shouted to the horse, «Go! Go, dear!» and the cart, creaking old wheels, rolled down the dusty, bumpy slope, overgrown with creeping shrubs...

At the bazaar, Nazar first went to Panteley. Panteley was a bald little man of small stature with a groovy, at first glance, cheerful character and running eyes. But behind this gaiety,

in fact, was a dodgy cunning and the desire in no way to lose his interest.

Seeing an artisan approaching the trading rows, Panteley perked up, «Oh, Nazar! I've been waiting for you for a long time. Well, come on, come on, and show me what you brought! The clerk of the merchant Kabanov has several times wondered when they will be pleased to receive their order.»

«Well, I did everything as I promised,» Nazar said, throwing back the old cloth that covered the goods.

In the cart were forged monograms made for the new estate of the merchant Kabanov, indicating his well-known name in the local area, a weather vane on the roof, repeating the shape of a rooster about to jump off a pole, and drainpipes decorated with carved flowers.

Panteley looked at the goods with a snide smile and, screwing up his cunning little eyes, he began to count everything carefully, at the same time trying to find at least a small defect in order to have reason to pay as little as possible. Finding no flaw, he decided not to back down anyway, «Nazar, I will buy all this from you for twenty rubles!»

The artisan, clearly not expecting such a turn of affairs, frowned and objected to the merchant, «How is that, Panteley? After all, we agreed on thirty rubles!»

«Well, as you like,» Panteley answered him, showing his feigned indifference. «Today things are not going well with me. I can only offer twenty... And then look, I'll order everything

from Tryphon. Maybe he will make the entire order for eighteen rubles...»

«Tryphon will make everything not properly. And he will not complete this work on time! But the merchant will not wait,» Nazar said indignantly. «Furthermore, Tryphon spends a lot of his time in the pub.»

Panteley, who liked the product very much and especially the colorful tin bouquets of flowers, was not going to give up.

«I also got an order for a long wrought-iron fence. And this, perhaps, will be worth a hundred rubles. So look, Nazar, I'll give it to another craftsman! Or, perhaps, you will concede everything for twenty rubles? After all, you need to feed your family,» said the trader with a sly smile.

Nazar scratched his head, looked at his daughter, and with a wave of his hand, agreed.

«The hell with you, Panteley! Take it for twenty! But keep the new big order for me.»

«Of course, of course, Nazar,» Panteley melted into a smile, satisfied with the successful outcome of the bargaining. «Of course, I'll keep it for you! Who else should I give it to but you?»

After counting out Nazar's twenty hard-earned rubles he nodded to his boy assistants, who hurriedly began to transfer the goods from the cart to the shed. Nazar said goodbye to Pantelei and led the harnessed horse further along the Bazaar to the rich merchant rows, heading to the pastry shops of the merchant

Volobayev, which attracted with their fragrance and colorful wrappers local sweet tooth, who were mostly young women and children. Many of them were not even going to buy anything, but came here just to see and enjoy this entire mouth-watering atmosphere.



Nazar approached to one of the central stores and noticed the clerk Klementiy sitting at a small writing desk, as always, very well-dressed – in a belted snow-white starched shirt, a black silk waistcoat, luxurious expensive trousers and polished boots to shine. It seemed that Klementiy was very busy: he quickly moved the beads of the wooden abacus and immediately wrote

down something in the notebook. Seeing Nazar, the assistant approached Klementiy and whispered something to him softly. The clerk turned toward the blacksmith and looked at him with tired eyes over his glasses.

«Ah, Nazar! Good morning! Wait a second!» he said. Then he hurriedly made the last calculations, closed the notebook and went to the counter.

Nazar began to lay out tin boxes on which were depicted ladies in wide-brimmed hats, outlandish birds, fluttering butterflies and dragonflies, delicate buds and large blooming flowers. In the rays of the bright morning sun, they shimmered, merrily playing with all the shades of colors and mother of pearl, attracting the attention of curious passers-by. Klementiy quickly looked at the goods and counted out the previously agreed amount to Nazar. The clerk was a business man and always highly appreciated his time. He had known Nazar for a long time and trusted him completely.

«Your boxes are so good! As always, are pleasing to the eye!» Klementiy said, admiring the product. «By the way, in a month we will bring an even bigger batch of chocolate. Ipatiy Petrovich wants to open additional shops on the market square in Stavropol. So, Nazar, please accept a new order for one hundred boxes: forty small, thirty medium and thirty large. If you make it in time, I'll add three more rubles on top.»

«I'll make it in time. I will not let Ipatiy Petrovich down!» Nazar answered, taking his daughter's hand.

Noticing Ulyana, enthusiastically examining sweets in the showcase, Klementiy smiled, leaned over and pulled out from under the counter a small box, made by Nazar himself, and filled with chocolate.

«Well, help yourself, blue-eyed beauty!» he said, handing out the box to the girl. Ulyana shone with happiness, took the gift with both hands and, unable to resist, opened the lid, grabbed one candy and quickly sent it into her mouth.

«What needs to be said?» Nazar muttered to his daughter.

«Thank you, sir!» Ulyana answered, beaming with joy, and ran to hide the box in the cart.

Nazar bowed to Klementiy and headed further along the trading rows, looking for gifts for his wife and daughters. He bought a festive shawl and beads for Galina and patent leather shoes for the girls, which at that time not every artisan could afford to buy for his children. Nazar was about to return home, when suddenly Ulyana grabbed his hand and exclaimed:

«Daddy, look, what a sarafan³ was bought for a girl! I wish I had one like it!»

The sarafan was really beautiful. It was made of red chintz, decorated with white patterns, embroidered with colored braid and beads. Nazar estimated how much money he still had left, looked at his daughter, sighed heavily, and went to the tradeswoman.

«Good day! What price do you ask for such a sarafan?» Nazar

³ Sarafan is a Russian traditional folk women's costume.

asked the owner of the goods.

«Six rubles, but this was the last one. I'll bring the same one back only in two weeks,» the saleswoman chattered. «Right now I can offer a few other cuts and colors. It will be cheaper, but without beads and braid.»

«Well, Ulyana, we'll have to wait two weeks,» Nazar said, stroking his daughter on the head.

Ulyana's face turned red, grimaced, and bitter tears flowed down her cheeks.

«I don't want to wait so long!» he girl sobbed.

Not wanting to lose a client, the tradeswoman quickly figured out what to do.

«I live in Nikolina Balka, ten versts from here. At home, I have the same sarafan of the appropriate size. So if you decide, come tomorrow. So be it, I'll give it to you for five rubles.»

«Well, what can I do,» Nazar sighed. «I have to please my daughter. I'll come to you tomorrow for a sarafan by noon.»

Having made an agreement with the tradeswoman, the blacksmith got into the cart with his daughter and headed home.

CHAPTER 3. A MEETING

By noon the next day, Nazar, as promised, arrived to Nikolina Balka and bought a gift from the tradeswoman promised to his daughter. But on the way back, something unexpected happened: when leaving the village, the cart suddenly creaked strongly, and then a wheel fell off. Nazar had to spend a lot of time repairing the damage. When at last everything was fixed, he, being late, set off again. Despite the unfortunate incident, Nazar rode along the deserted road in high spirits, whistling and singing a Cossack song. It seemed that the whole steppe around him was singing along with its chirping of birds and the chirping of crickets hiding in the tall grass, which swayed slightly in the light steppe wind. Carried away by the road, Nazar did not immediately notice how dusk had fallen. The birds stopped singing. And almost in the middle of the way, near the hills, in a deserted area, a strong wind suddenly arose, driving from nowhere black heavy thunderclouds. Lightning flashed – and in a few seconds the rainfall began to fall. The horse whinnied in fright and rushed forward.

Suddenly Nazar noticed that a pack of wolves was rapidly approaching him from the side of the hills from a wooded gully. These wolves were almost twice the size of those whom he had ever seen in his life. Their fur stood on end, their eyes, bloodshot, glowed in the dark with bright red lights, and huge fangs were

visible from their grinning mouths with tongues hanging to one side. Nazar stood up in the cart at full height and with his hands trembling with fear and horror began to shake the reins and shout to the horse:

«Well, come on, honey, help me out! Faster! Faster! Please! Take me out of here! Do not let die a cruel death!»

The horse, as if understanding its master, galloped as fast as it could, snorting its nostrils and uttering a wheezing sound. The wolves, having caught up with the wagon and ominously clicking their teeth, tried to surround it on both sides. Nazar's life flashed through his head, he remembered his wife and children who could be left without him. Fear seemed to intoxicate and deafen him. Nazar no longer even looked back at the wolves. In front of him he saw only a horse rushing forward and heard the beating of his heart, which was sometimes drowned out by the sound of the hooves of a faithful friend rushing in terror. Already almost resigned to his terrible fate, the blacksmith caught himself thinking that he was still alive. Nazar turned back and found that those wolves were gone. He was filled with joy. Exhaling a sigh of relief, he slowed down the horse's pace, but still felt his heart pounding and tearing from his chest.



After riding a little more, Nazar noticed in the darkness away from the road, in a clearing by the hills, illuminated by the gentle light of the moon, the outlines of the figure of a little girl sitting on a wet stone. He jumped off the cart and walked up to her, making his way through the thicket of low-growing bushes. The seemingly stranger with large brown eyes and thick black hair, carelessly gathered in a braid and hidden under a kerchief, was about seven years old. Her clothes were soaking wet from the rain. The girl looked at him from under her brows with an adult serious look, tightly clutching a beautiful doll with unusually expressive eyes, similar to the little owner herself.

«Where are you from, girl? Whose are you?» Nazar asked the

little girl.

«I'm from here,» the girl said in a hoarse voice that sounded like an adult, while continuing to stare at Nazar with an attentive and, as it seemed to him, incredulously evil gaze. He even doubted for a moment that this was a child. The girl, as if noticing this doubt in him, suddenly smiled and quickly changed her expression to a really childlike and naive one.

«What are you doing here?» Nazar asked.

In response, the little stranger suddenly whimpered and, wiping her tears with her hands, continued, «I'm an orphan. My father and mother died. I live here in the forest, in a big hollow in a tree. I eat what I can find. It's hard for me, Sir. Take me with you, or I'll be lost here.»

Seeing her plaintive and questioning expression in her eyes, Nazar shuddered in his heart. He remembered what had just happened to him, and he could not leave a defenseless girl at night in such inclement weather on a deserted wasteland to certain death. The blacksmith took the orphan in his arms, carried her to his cart, wrapped her in an old blanket, and hurried home.

A worried wife with children met him near the yard. She held a kerosene lamp in her hand, peering into the darkness of the road running down the hill. Noticing her husband, Galina exclaimed, «Nazarushka! Where have you been for so long? We searched for you a long time. All eyes have overlooked... Oh, my God! Who is this? What miracle is this?» she asked Nazar in surprise when she saw the girl.

«I got very wet, Galya. Let's go to the hut. I'll tell you everything there,» he answered in a tired voice.

In the house Galina pulled out the dry clothes of her daughters from the chest, helped the stranger soaked through to change, and then quickly put food on the table.

At dinner Nazar told everything that happened to him – both about the wolves and about the girl. The orphan, having seated her doll next to him on a chair, silently and with great appetite devoured the food that was put on the plate by the caring hostess.

«What is your name, girl?» Nazar asked.

«Pelageya,» the girl muttered with a displeased look, furrowing her eyebrows.

«Call us dad and mom. Now we will be your parents. We have two daughters, and we will raise a third. Maybe there will be enough food for everyone,» the artisan continued, glancing at his wife.

Suddenly Vasilisa, Nazar's youngest daughter, jumped up from the table and ran to the doll sitting next to the girl.

«Oh, what a beauty!» she exclaimed, approaching the toy. «And what eyes!»

Ulyana, who at this time was spinning in front of the mirror, holding a sarafan brought by Nazar, was also interested in the doll. The girl put the new thing aside, intending to go closer to the unusual toy, but immediately stopped, startled by the unexpected scream of the little guest.

«Don't you dare touch my doll!» Pelageya shouted in some

kind of animal-like wild voice and, like a fierce cat, rushed to her thing, snatching it from Vasilisa's hands. Shrinking and clutching the doll tightly to her chest, Pelageya cast an evil glance from under her brows towards Nazar and Galina, who were stunned and surprised by her action.

«Well, it's getting late. It's time to go to bed. We have to get up early tomorrow. There is a lot of work to be done at home and in the household,» yawning, Nazar said after a silent pause.

Ulyana went up to the girl and took her hand: «Let's go, Pelageyushka! Vasilisa and I will show you our children's bedchamber. There's room for everyone. We also have dolls there. And other toys.»

Pelageya, as if cautiously, continuing to hold the doll tightly to her, followed Ulyana. But on the threshold to the girls' room, she suddenly stood rooted to the spot, staring at the icon with a candle, standing in the corner on a shelf nailed to the wall. Despite the persuasion of the sisters, Pelageya never entered the room. Noticing in the hut another small room with a small window and looking at it with a cursory glance, she turned to Nazar and, with a fake smile, asked him in some pretextual sweet voice, «Daddy, will you give me this little room? It would be more comfortable for me to live in.»

«Well, take it, since you like it so much,» he answered with a surprised face and ordered Galina to make a bed for Pelageya.

Tired and exhausted after a hard day, Nazar retired to his room and within a quarter of an hour began to snore, falling into

a deep and unbroken sleep. His wife, meanwhile, put the girls to bed, poured milk into a bowl for the cat and then checked whether the front door was locked with an iron bar for the night. When she was done, she went to bed, too.

Around midnight, Galina suddenly woke up to the feeling that someone pulled the door leading to the bedroom, which was locked on a hook. At first, she thought that perhaps she was just dreaming, but nevertheless she was wary and decided to postpone sleep, listening to the silence, which was broken only by the singing of crickets outside the window and snoring of Nazar sleeping next to her.

Some time has passed. Nothing was happening. Galina already wanted to fall asleep again, but suddenly she heard a wolf howl in the hills and in the window which was looking over the fence, she noticed something flashed, for a moment, blocking the moonlight, which slightly illuminated the dark room.

«Probably a night bird. But somehow today wolves are howling unusually close to home,» she thought, drawing attention to the rare, quiet, but agitated neigh of the horse in the stable.

Suddenly, behind the door, there was a creak of a wooden floor, a rustle and a strange sound, similar to a whisper, which was suddenly interrupted by the hiss and growl of the house cat. Concerned about her children sleeping in the next room, Galina decided to go out and see what was happening there. She lit a kerosene lamp, quietly walked to the door and, listening, opened it. First of all, Galina hurried to her daughters: she pulled

the door handle, but realized that the girls had locked themselves on a hook from the inside. Then she quietly entered Pelageya's room – the girl was sleeping peacefully in an embrace with a doll, her face turned to the wall. After checking the locks on the front door again, Galina calmed down a bit and returned to the bedroom. All night long she did not close her eyes, and only at dawn, with the beginning of the crowing of the roosters, she managed to fall asleep.

CHAPTER 4. AN INCIDENT ON THE MOUNTAIN

In the morning, the whole family gathered at the table for breakfast.

«Mom, did you hear how loudly and close the wolves howled last night? Vasilisa and I became scared, we even locked our door on the hook,» said Ulyana.

«Yes, I heard. It's really too close. Probably, there is little game in the hills and steppe. They want to eat. It's right that you and Vasilisa locked yourself in just in case. From now on, lock the door on the hook every night,» Galina answered, casting a glance at Pelageya, who was sitting with tousled hair and eating a bagel, washing it down with milk, while clumsily and childishly staining her mouth and clothes.

«A child is a child,» thought Galina, smiling slightly, trying to extinguish her anxiety and doubts.

«Mommy, can we go to the village to Nikolka with Varya today? Their father was supposed to arrive from Stavropol yesterday with a wagon train. He promised them goodies and gifts of all kinds from there to bring. Ulyana and I are very curious to look at them. And we will take Pelageyushka with us, let her also be friends with our friends,» Vasilisa turned to her mother.

Galina, seeing Nazar's approving look, allowed the girls

to visit the village, but first asked to help her with the household – to milk the goats and feed the chickens. When the children went out into the yard and walked towards the goat pen, the animals began to behave unexpectedly agitated. As if frightened of something, they ran into a heap on the opposite side at the wall of the barn and began to watch Pelageya warily.

«Strangely. This is not good,» Galina thought to herself. «How many times have people been here, but they have never looked at anyone so frightened before... Well, come on,» she said to the girls, «go to Nikolka and Varya now. I'll milk the goats myself.»

...Having invited guests to the house, Varya's and Nikolka's mother sat all the children at the table, gave them tea with cheesecakes and distributed colorful lollipops brought by her husband from Stavropol, cast in the shape of fir-trees, towers and figures of various animals.

«Well, let's see what else your father brought you from Stavropol,» Ulyana said with interest, examining a transparent orange lollipop in the form of a bunny that glittered in the sun.

«He brought me some toy soldiers,» Nikolka said before his sister could answer, and, bending down under the bench, took out a wooden box. Opening it, he placed on the table in a battle formation painted and varnished figures of hussars, who seemed to immediately rush on horseback to attack directly at the samovar standing in front.

«Come on, I'll show you something else,» Varya said, calling

everyone, and pulled Ulyana by the hand into the next room.

There, on a table by the window, stood a metal box, decorated with patterns and mother-of-pearl. Varya pressed the lock lever – and another smaller lid opened from the top of her lid, from which a mechanical bird, similar to a nightingale, jumped out. She was turning in directions, flapping her wings and spilling into trills. The inside of the box was trimmed with wood and upholstered in red velvet. Amazed by the little thing and full of childish envy, Vasilisa suddenly blurted out, «Just think, a box with a bird! But we have such a beautiful doll that no one else in the village has ever seen. Isn't that so, Pelageyushka?»

Pelageya, in response with a grim face, said in a quiet displeased voice, «What are you talking about? There is no doll.»

«Well, how is that not?» Vasilisa did not calm down. «We saw her at your place lately. You hid it in mother's empty linen chest in your room.»

Hearing this, Pelageya turned white with anger and was almost ready to pounce on Vasilisa.

«Don't quarrel over nothing!» Nikolka intervened. «Let's better all of us now climb Mount Kutsay together. Let's look at our village and its surroundings from above.»



«Oh, this is so amusing! Why not really climb the mountain?» Ulyana was delighted. «They say that sometimes the great Elbrus is visible from there.»

Vasilisa and Varya also happily supported this idea. Only Pelageya silently looked out the window, plunged into her thoughts.

Having gathered, the children set off on a long journey, making their way up the rocky slope through dense thickets of hazel, rose hips and wild plums. At the top of the mountain, they really had an amazing view of the village and its surroundings. With its white huts, yellow thatched roofs, haystacks, a river and green gardens in the rays of the sun and against the background of a clear blue sky, it looked like a huge cake from above, miraculously concocted by some unknown but skillful magician.

«What a beauty!» Varya exclaimed. «Oh, look! Over there you can see our hut with the yard.»

At that moment, to the surprise of the children, a frightened hare suddenly jumped out of a nearby large briar bush and rushed down the slope, quickly hiding in the thicket of plums.

«Look! And there is Elbrus!» said Nikolka, pointing with his hand in the direction opposite from the village, where a majestic mountain was visible on the horizon. Its two-humped snow-white peak resembled a sleeping white camel, which seemed to hover and soar in the blue sky.

While everyone was admiring the view of Elbrus, Vasilisa noticed a small cherry plum tree growing off to the side at the edge of a steep cliff. Deciding to feast on wild fruits, she stood on a stone right on the edge of the abyss and wanted to pick the fruits, but suddenly she felt that someone was standing behind her. The girl looked back and saw Pelageya, who was looking at her with some cold, frozen, repulsive gaze. Vasilisa got scared, recoiled back and, stumbling, almost fell down – only at the last moment did she manage to firmly grasp the branch and, resting her feet on the mountainside, hung on it. Pelageya approached the edge of the cliff and continued to look from above with her magical gaze, from which Vasilisa's whole body was shackled. Vasilisa felt that she was about to unclench her fingers and fall. Some unknown force tied her throat and did not allow her to scream to call for help.

Suddenly, the swallows flying around were greatly alarmed in the sky. They gathered in a large flock and began to attack Pelageya, striking her head and face with their claws. Waving aside the birds and hiding behind her hands, she distracted herself from Vasilisa and backed away. Varya turned around at the noise.

«Look!» she shouted. «How many swallows! Strange, they attacked our Pelageyushka!»

«Where is Vasilisa?» Ulyana asked anxiously. The girl ran to the edge of the cliff and saw her little sister clinging to a tree branch, who was trying to climb up. Bending down, Ulyana

began to pull Vasilisa, grabbing her clothes. But her strength was not enough. Nikolka saved the situation – he immediately rushed to the rescue of Ulyana and helped pull Vasilisa out of the cliff.

«How did you get there?» Ulyana asked her sister in a trembling voice.

«It's all she! She scared me, and I fell down!» screamed Vasilisa in tears, pointing her finger at Pelageya, who was standing to the side.

«It's your own fault! There is nothing to blame on others! Be cautious and careful next time! And do not go to such places without asking,» as if in an adult way, Ulyana scolded her younger sister, brushing off her clothes.

From below came the bell ringing of the village church.

«Okay, it's time to go back! We are probably already being searched for,» said Nikolka and, once again taking a look at the village from a height, led everyone back.

The girls returned home quite late. Pelageya retired to her room, and Ulyana and Vasilisa sat in the kitchen and began vying to tell their mother about their visit to Nikolka and Varya – about the treats and gifts that their father had brought from Stavropol.

«Where did you scratch your feet so badly?» Mother asked Vasilisa in surprise.

In response, the girl told her about what had happened on the mountain. Whimpering, she again began to complain about Pelageya, that it was she who scared her and pushed her off the cliff, and then with her unusual gaze fettered her body and did

not give the opportunity to call for help, and only the swallows at the last moment saved her by flying at Pelageya.

«Stop it, Vasilisa!» Ulyana intervened. «Pelageyushka has nothing to do with it. You were just scared, not expecting to see her behind your back, and you fell down yourself. The fear of falling into the abyss immobilized you and did not allow you to call for help. Although,» Ulyana thought for a second, «the swallows really behaved unusually when they pounced on Pelageyushka.»

Galina listened to her daughters and became wary, recalling the strange events that happened last night, and how much the goats in the yard were scared at the sight of Pelageya.

In the morning of the next day, Nazar got ready for business in the village. Galina asked him to stop by on the way to Granny Efrosinya – a longtime acquaintance, a local fortune-teller and sorceress – and invite her over for tea, and at the same time tell fortunes on the cards.

CHAPTER 5. THE FORTUNE-TELLER

In the afternoon, already closer to the third hour, shuffling up the winding road, Efrosinya reached Nazar's house.

«Hello, Galinushka! Good to see you! I haven't seen you for a long time,» the old woman smiled, pretty heavily panting after the hard climb up the hill. «Oh, the road to you is very difficult; once again no one will go. This morning Nazar stopped by me and said that you wanted to see me. It is necessary-so it is necessary. As soon as I figured out my affairs, I went to you.»

«Good day, Granny Efrosinya!» Galina greeted her happily. «Yes, you haven't come to see us for a long time. We were already getting bored. I kept getting ready to visit you too, but in no way – now children, now household chores... Well, let's go, let's go to the hut to the table, otherwise the samovar is already getting cold. Forgive me for distracting from urgent matters, but I really need to know what awaits us in the future. Now something has become alarming in my soul.»

«Time for you, Galinushka, I will always find when it's necessary,» the fortune-teller continued in response, having entered the hut and sitting down at a table. «And that's right, I have a lot of things to do these days. Someone asks to tell fortunes, another one to make a love spell, and the other one to lift curses. So, last Thursday Ustinya came to me. Well, Tryphon's wife. She was crying, ulcers, said, all of a sudden,

have appeared down her legs for no reason. It hurt to step. And it all started after she found the charmed coins right at the gate of Pantelei. And I asked her, why did you pick up other people's coins? They were not meant for you! I conjured over her, gave her a decoction of herbs, and told her to throw those coins away from people's eyes,» said Efrosinya, looking at the treats. «Oh, you always have wonderful baked food, Galinushka! Every time I try it and every time I'm overjoyed' the old woman praised the hostess, taking a bite of a large patterned spice-cake and washing it down with tea from a saucer.

«Help yourself, Granny Efrosinya. Eat, don't be shy! I know you love something sweet,» Galina smiled. «In the morning I baked everything myself. It's nice that you liked it.»

«Well, what gnaws at you, Galinushka, if you called me so urgently? Or did anything happen?» asked Efrosinya.

In response, the hostess told the fortune-teller about how Nazar picked up the girl in a deserted place and about the strange events that began to occur afterwards.

«Let me, Galinushka, tell fortunes on this girl. The whole story that you just told is too suspicious for me,» said the old woman.

Pushing the cup and saucer aside, she pulled an old battered deck out of her skirt pocket. She quickly shuffled it, pulled three cards out of the middle at once, and spread them out on the table with the back side. Then she began to take out more cards one at a time from the deck and lay them around. As soon as the fortune-teller turned over all the cards front side, she gasped.



«Look, look, Galinushka,» she called the hostess closer to her. «You see: the queen of spades has fallen in the middle, and all the cards around it are also in black suits. It's as if some kind of witch and nearby evil spirits gathered. Only one thing is strange: I'm guessing at a girl, and the cards show me an adult woman.»

«Maybe you are wrong, Granny Efrosinya?» Galina was puzzled. «Besides me, there are no more women here.»

«I could be wrong because of old age,» the old woman answered with barely noticeable resentment, «but these cards have not been lying to me for many years. I sense something unkind in this, Galinushka. Some kind of trouble awaits you and

your family. And so far I don't even know how to help.»

«Oh, Efrosinya, teach me how to be, how to ward off trouble from the house,» Galina lamented.

«I need to think about it. And now it's time for me to go home,» said the sorceress, looking out the window. «It will soon be evening, and the way from you is not short.»

Efrosinya collected the cards, put the deck in her skirt pocket and got up from the table.

«Oh, wait, granny!» Galina caught herself, taking a small paper roll from the table near the wooden stove. «I almost forgot! Here I have prepared some goodies for you, so don't refuse to accept them from us.»

«Thank you very much, Galinushka! You are a glorious hostess!» smiled the fortune-teller and took the gift.

She took a couple of steps towards the exit, but suddenly stood rooted to the spot, turned to Galina, and with her hand on her chin exclaimed with an anxious expression on her face, «Good gracious! And isn't it Khatuna by any chance?!»

«What did you say, granny?» asked Galina not hearing her.

Without having time to answer, the old woman suddenly noticed how the door of the next room opened slightly and behind her appeared part of Pelageya's face, who was staring at her with one eye. Frightened by something, the fortune-teller hurried, «Oh, it's time for me, it's time, Galinushka! I must go home!» and hurried out of the hut into the courtyard.

Already at the exit at the gate, she said in a low voice to the

hostess who was accompanying her, «We have this Saturday, Galinushka, the Apple Feast of the Saviour⁴ is coming. Take the apples to the Church to consecrate them, and at the same time take this girl there. Let's see how she behaves. And I'll come to you on Sunday again. You will tell me what happened and how.»

Galina listened to the advice of the fortune-teller and on a holiday, collecting a basket of apples and putting the pies baked the day before, she went to the village church with the children in the morning. She strictly ordered her daughters not to tell Pelageya that they would go to church...

«Pelageyushka, come with us!» Ulyana called her, straightening a new sundress on herself. «Today there will be festivities in the village. There is no need to sit at home on such a day!»

Pelageya reluctantly agreed, and the girls with Galina went to the center of the village.

Carried away by the road, they imperceptibly turned to the church.

«Why did you stand up like an idol?» Ulyana was surprised. «Let's go inside! We need to consecrate pies and apples.»

The girl pulled the named sister by the hand, but she pulled her palm and answered sharply, «I have nothing to do there! There are already a lot of people there. I'd rather wait here.»

⁴ The Apple Feast of the Saviour or Apple Spas is an Eastern Slavic folk name for the Feast of the Transfiguration, which is celebrated on August 19.

No matter how the girls and Galina persuaded the little obstinate, she flatly refused to even approach the temple.

«Well, okay, what to do with you. Wait for us here!» said Galina, grabbed a heavy basket of fruit and pies and headed with her daughters towards the church...

After a while they appeared at the exit from the temple. The joyful Vasilisa was carrying two large red apples in her hands.

«Here, take it, Pelageyushka!» she said. «They say that if you make a wish and eat a consecrated apple, then your wish will come true.»

«Here's another, what nonsense!» Pelageya muttered with displeasure. «I don't need anything!»

«Well, eat at least a piece,» Vasilisa persisted. «The apple in the Transfiguration of the Lord is not simple. You'll see!»

But Pelageya did not give in to any persuasion. In the end, she got angry, knocked the fruits out of Vasilisa's hands and, turning around, ran along the road towards the house.

«Yes... Evidently, Efrosinya was speaking the truth,» Galina thought to herself and together with her daughters quickened her pace to catch up with Pelageya.

CHAPTER 6. AN ANCIENT LEGEND

The next day, Efrosinya, as promised, again came to visit. Galina, in anticipation of her arrival, melted the samovar, baked pancakes and laid the table, decorating it with fruits and apple pie.

As soon as the fortune-teller entered the courtyard, she immediately asked in a half-whisper from the hostess if she had taken Pelageya to the church the previous day. In response, Galina told her what and how it was. Looking around, Efrosinya entered the hut and carefully looked at it inside.

«And where is this girl now?» she asked, sitting down at the table.

«In the morning I sent my daughters to collect ripe rose hips on the hillside. We want to dry them for the winter. Pelageya went with them. They are about to return,» answered Galina.

Looking again towards Pelageya's room, the old woman reached across the table closer to Galina and took her hand.

«Listen to me, Galinushka, what I'll tell you now. In vain, Nazar picked up the girl and brought her home. It will bring troubles and misfortunes to your family and our entire village. She is not a girl at all, but a witch named Khatuna. For a long time she was not in our region. My grandmother, the kingdom of heaven to her, told me a story about her. There is a legend that is known only to some old people in our village. Many, many

years ago, when Petrovskoye was not even in sight, the lands of the vast kingdom of the Khazars stretched here, the soldiers of which were mainly engaged in making predatory raids on Holy Russia and on their other neighbors, bringing rich booty to their ruler – the Khan. So,» having a sip of tea, continued Efrosinya, «once the khan himself with his army, family and retinue from a long campaign rode here across the steppe. They stopped to rest near our hills: to feed and water their horses, well, and to have a meal themselves. After sitting until dark, they kindled fires and settled down for the night, setting up tents. At midnight, when everyone was already asleep, except the guards, wolves attacked their camp in a large flock. They grabbed the baby, who was khan's daughter, named Khatuna, and dragged her into the hills. Khan sent his best warriors to chase, but they could not rescue the princess from the wolf captivity. For several days, his horsemen were looking for the girl in the vicinity. Desperate to find his daughter and heartbroken, the khan decided to continue on his way to his capital. The child survived. It was nurtured by unknown forces of darkness and turned into a real fiend, created to bring evil and misfortune to our land. Since then, about once every hundred years, she appears in the dark by the road near the hills, in the guise of a little girl with a doll in her hands.»

«Oh, what am I to do, Granny?» Galina asked fearfully. «You told me a terrible story. Was it really so?»

«I've been living for a long time, Galinushka. A lot of things

I've seen in my time. Listen to me as an old woman – get rid of her. You need to take this girl to the same place where Nazar picked her up, or, even worse, to a distant steppe, and leave her there,» the fortune-teller answered and turned around, hearing the creak of the slightly opened door leading to Pelageya's room. «Galinushka, is there really no one in the hut, besides us?» Efrosinya asked in a quiet, anxious voice.

«No, Granny. We are alone. That could have been a draft blowing and pulling the door,» reassured her hostess noticing the fear in the eyes of the old woman, and then continued. «Maybe you got it wrong? How can we take a child to the steppe and leave it there? What kind of heart do we need to have and how do we live with all of this then?»

The fortune-teller was about to contradict her, but before she could utter a word, Ulyana and Vasilisa entered the hut noisily and cheerfully from the porch with baskets filled to the brim with rosehip fruits. Pelageya appeared after them.

«Good work! You have picked up so many rosehip fruits! Now it's enough for the whole winter,» Galina was delighted. «By the way, Granny Efrosinya has come to visit us here. Sit down with us to drink tea.»

Heeding her words, the children sat down at the table, and, pouring tea from the samovar, pounced on the pancakes that had not yet cooled down after the oven.

«Yes, apparently, good rose hips have grown this year,» Efrosinya decided to keep up the conversation, looking at the

baskets with fruits and immediately glancing at Pelageya.

In response, Ulyana and Vasilisa were enthusiastically carried away by the dispute, who of them this time picked up more rosehips. Pelageya, meanwhile, finished her pancake, sat down at the far edge of the table and began to gaze intently out the window.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

Текст предоставлен ООО «ЛитРес».

Прочитайте эту книгу целиком, [купив полную легальную версию](#) на ЛитРес.

Безопасно оплатить книгу можно банковской картой Visa, MasterCard, Maestro, со счета мобильного телефона, с платежного терминала, в салоне МТС или Связной, через PayPal, WebMoney, Яндекс.Деньги, QIWI Кошелек, бонусными картами или другим удобным Вам способом.