Temptation

Once there lived a husband and wife, young people, hardworking. And they had a decent living, by peasant standards, and God had given them a child, and they lived together harmoniously, in love and accord. Remembering God and not forgetting the poor and afflicted.

"Hmm, -- the unclean one said to himself one day. -- Is that possible! My superiors won't praise me if I leave this husband and wife living in peace." Right away he tied his tail to his leg with a string so it wouldn't stick out, put a tall city hat on his head, lordly gloves on his paws -- and off he went with a cane, as if some important gentleman were out for a stroll.

He was walking past the hut of that husband and wife in the evening, saw that they were sitting on the bench by the wall, and greeted them: "Hello, good people!" They, as is customary, replied: "And to you God grant whatever you wish for yourself!" Though at those words he was bent completely double, still he stopped and sat down beside them on the bench.

And how cunning these devils are! He began asking the husband and wife about everything, about their life and livelihood, and so sweetly, as if he really wished them well. Well, they believed him, and especially the woman melted -- she began telling the unclean one all her womanly troubles: that she couldn't buy herself a new kerchief, that she had to wear patched shoes on holidays, and this and that...

"I have taken a great liking to you, good people, -- says the unclean one, -- and I am a rich gentleman and can give you complete happiness -- so much money that you couldn't spend it in a lifetime. Come with me now: I live not far from here."

Out of nowhere a carriage with four horses appeared. The unclean one got in, seated the husband and wife opposite him, and off they went!.. The demonic force howled, hummed, squeaked; the carriage flies, as if carried by the wind...

The carriage stopped at night before huge, huge chambers. The unclean one went in, and the peasant and his wife after him...

Lord, what wealth is all around! Glass floors, silver ceilings, golden walls -- and all over them red birds are painted. And the benches, what the tables are made of -- one can't tell. On all the tables -- all dishes, bowls, plates, bottles -- and all with food and drink, the very best that tsars have.

The peasant and his wife stand with mouths agape; and the gentleman who brought them -- the unclean one -- asks: "Well, is it good?" "Very good, -- says the peasant, -- God has blessed you with wealth, sir!" The unclean one was bent double. "What's the matter with you?" -- asks the peasant. "Nothing, something's gripped my stomach... So, good people, live here three days; then I'll take you home and give you so much money that you'll be richer than the tsar himself. Only one condition: eat your fill of all these dishes, drink from all the bottles, but that bowl which is covered, standing in the middle of the table -- do not open it: if you open it, you'll get nothing from me, you'll leave empty-handed." The unclean one said this, left and locked the door behind him.

When they were left alone, they sat at the table and began eating the gentleman's dishes and drinking sweet wine. They ate and ate, drank and drank -- and tumbled onto the downy featherbeds to sleep. After sleeping, they ate again. What was there to do next? They didn't want to sleep or eat, there was no work. They went to look around the house. They walked through it all, marveled at everything, ate again, slept -- until evening was far gone.

They sit before the table, looking at the drink and food. "It's boring, though, sitting like this," -- says the husband. "It would be all right, -- answers the wife, -- but there's no real freedom. Eat and sleep; it would be another matter if we bought ourselves a big estate, having received money from this gentleman. We'd have our own horses and carriage, make acquaintances -- all the richest and most noble gentlemen. We'd come to church on a holiday -- me in such a dress that everyone would envy me... Now that would be good; instead you sit within four walls, guarding some bowl. And the bowl is rubbish; there's probably nothing good in it." "Well, you'd better stop thinking about the bowl," -- says the husband.

Somehow they sat at the table until evening, slept through the night, woke up early in the morning. The husband says: "I'll lie down a bit more." But the wife got up, walks around the room circling the table and keeps glancing at the bowl. "Why did the master forbid opening it, what's in it?" "Who knows, -- says the husband, -- what he hid in it. Maybe a devil is sitting in there!" "Oh, how you frightened me! What if it opens by itself somehow; I'd better take it, wrap it in something and hide it somewhere out of sight." -- "No, better not touch it."

The woman couldn't sleep all night, tossing from side to side: "What's in this bowl?" And she woke her husband every minute, so that he got up in the morning unslept, gloomy, and as for the woman, no need to say -- she was completely worn out. They sat and sat. The woman would now and then approach the bowl and touch the lid with her finger. "What's there to fear, -- she says, -- I'll just shift the lid a little, peek inside with one eye and slide it back." "Don't you dare!"

It was getting toward evening. The wife saw that her husband was dozing and made up her mind: "Eh, come what may; I'll look!" She approached quietly, lifted the lid... Out of the bowl popped a mouse, jumped off the table and darted into a hole.

The woman dropped the lid, screamed at the top of her lungs... And then the lock in the door went click! -- and the unclean one enters: of course he knew the woman couldn't resist, he had been waiting just behind the door for that. "Aha, -- he says, -- so you, woman, did not obey my command, you opened the bowl... You have a bad wife, good man; look what you've lost because of her. And the unclean one led them into a special room, filled to the ceiling with gold coins. "See, -- he says, -- all this I wanted to give you, you would live better than tsars. But now get out of my sight, go on foot; find your own home as best you can... Ah, good man, I'm sorry for you. In your place I would simply have killed the woman, beaten her half to death."

And the husband and wife went into the dark night, wherever their eyes led them, through the dense forest. They went hungry, got cold. "Eh, -- says the husband, -- what I have to endure because of you!" The wife answered him something, he got angry and beat her. A little later, the husband remembered again how good it would be now to ride in a carriage, to carry gold with him -- and he beat his wife again. She didn't let him off -- and they began to fight...

Somehow, after no small time, they made it home, began to live -- only harmony between them was completely gone: every day quarrels, fights. And that was just what the unclean one needed, that was what he had been scheming for. So look and marvel, good people: how cunning this unclean force is, how it knows how to tempt people and lead them to evil!