Folk Tale No. 270

A Cossack was riding along the road and rode into a deep forest; in that forest, on a clearing, stood a haystack. The Cossack stopped to rest a little, lay down beside the haystack, and lit his pipe; he smoked and smoked and did not notice how he dropped a spark into the hay. After resting, he got on his horse and set off on his way; he had not gone ten steps when flames burst forth and lit up the whole forest. The Cossack looked back and saw: the haystack was burning, and standing in the fire was a red maiden, and she said in a loud voice: "Cossack, good man! Save me from death." — "How can I save you? Flames all around, there is no way to reach you." — "Thrust your pike into the fire; I will climb out along it." The Cossack thrust his pike into the fire and turned away from the great heat.

Instantly the red maiden turned into a snake, climbed onto the pike, slid down onto the Cossack's neck, coiled around his neck three times, and took her tail in her teeth. The Cossack was frightened and could not think what to do or how to act. The snake spoke in a human voice: "Do not be afraid, good fellow! Wear me on your neck for seven years and seek out the tin kingdom, and when you arrive in that kingdom, stay and live there another seven years without going out. Serve this service, and you will be happy!"

The Cossack rode off to seek the tin kingdom; much time passed, much water flowed, and at the end of the seventh year he reached a steep mountain; on that mountain stood a tin castle, and around the castle a high white-stone wall. He galloped up the mountain, the wall parted before him, and he rode into a wide courtyard. At that very moment the snake tore itself from his neck, struck the damp earth, turned back into a soul-maiden, and vanished from sight — as if she had never been. The Cossack put his good horse in the stable, entered the palace, and began to look over the rooms. Everywhere there were mirrors, silver, and velvet, but nowhere could he see a single human soul. "Eh," thought the Cossack, "where have I ridden to? Who will feed and water me? It seems I am doomed to die of hunger!"

He had only just thought this when, lo and behold, a table stood before him covered with food and drink — everything in abundance; he ate and drank, strengthened his forces, and thought he would go look at his horse. He came to the stable — the horse stood in its stall eating oats. "Well, that is a good thing: it means I can live without want."

Long, long the Cossack remained in the tin castle, and deadly boredom took hold of him: it is no joke to be always alone! There was no one to exchange a word with. In his grief he got drunk, and it occurred to him to ride out into the open world; but wherever he turned — everywhere were high walls, no entrance, no exit. In vexation it seemed to him, so the good fellow seized a stick, went into the palace, and began smashing mirrors and glass, tearing velvet, breaking chairs, hurling silver: "Maybe the master will come out and let me free!" No, no one appeared. The Cossack lay down to sleep; the next day he woke, walked about a bit, and thought he would have a bite; he looked this way and that — there was nothing for him! "Eh," he thought, "a slave beats herself when she reaps uncleanly! See what trouble I made yesterday, and now I must go hungry!" He had only just repented when immediately food and drink — everything was ready!

Three days passed; waking in the morning, the Cossack looked out the window — at the porch stood his good horse, saddled. What could that mean? He washed, dressed, prayed to God, took his long pike, and went out into the wide courtyard. Suddenly, from who knows where, the red maiden appeared: "Greetings, good fellow! Seven years are over — you have saved me from final doom. Know then: I am a king's daughter; Koschei the Deathless loved me, carried me away from my father and mother, wanted to take me for his wife, but I laughed at him; so he grew angry and turned me into a fierce snake. Thank you for your long service! Now let us go to my father; he will reward you with a golden treasury and precious stones — take nothing, but ask for the little barrel that stands in the cellar." — "But what use is it?" — "Roll the barrel to the right — a palace will appear at once; roll it to the left — the palace will vanish." — "Very well," said the Cossack, got on his horse, seated the beautiful princess beside him; the high walls parted of themselves before him, and he rode off on his way.

Long or short, he arrived at the said kingdom. The king saw his daughter, rejoiced, began to thank him, and gave the Cossack full sacks of gold and pearls. The good fellow answered: "I need neither gold nor pearls; give me for a keepsake that little barrel that stands in the cellar." — "You ask for too much, brother! Well, there is nothing to be done: my daughter is dearer to me than anything! For her sake I do not begrudge even the barrel; take it with God's blessing." The Cossack took the royal gift and set off to wander the wide world.

He rode and rode, and an ancient old man came to meet him. The old man begged: "Feed me, good fellow!" The Cossack leaped from his horse, untied the barrel, and rolled it to the right — at that very moment a wondrous palace appeared. They both entered the painted chambers and sat down at the set table. "Hey, my faithful servants!" cried the Cossack. "Feed and give drink to my guest!" He had not

finished speaking when the servants brought a whole bull and three cauldrons of beer. The old man began to eat and praise; he ate the whole bull, drank three cauldrons of beer, grunted, and said: "Not enough, but there is nothing to be done! Thank you for bread and salt."

They went out of the palace; the Cossack rolled his barrel to the left — and the palace was gone as if it had never been. "Let us trade," said the old man to the Cossack, "I will give you a sword, and you give me the barrel." — "But what use is the sword?" — "Why, it is a self-cutting sword; just swing it — no matter how great an army, it will cut them all down! See, there is a forest growing; want me to give a demonstration?" Thereupon the old man drew his sword, swung it, and said: "Go, self-cutting sword, cut down the deep forest!" The sword flew off and began chopping down trees and laying them in fathoms; it chopped them down and returned to its master. The Cossack did not deliberate long, gave the old man the barrel, and took the self-cutting sword for himself; he swung the sword and killed the old man dead. Then he tied the barrel to his saddle, got on his horse, and thought of returning to the king. And a mighty enemy had come up to the capital city of that king; the Cossack saw an innumerable host, swung his sword at it: "Self-cutting sword! Serve me now, cut down the enemy host." Heads flew, blood flowed, and not an hour had passed when the whole field was covered with corpses.

The king rode out to meet the Cossack, embraced him, kissed him, and there and then decided to give him the beautiful princess in marriage. The wedding was a rich one; at that wedding I was present, I drank mead and wine, it ran down my mustache but not into my mouth.