Truth and Falsehood — Variant 9

Truth and Falsehood live here on our earth: Truth lives in the palace, and in the lord's manor, and in the peasant's hut; the people say that she lives with God; Falsehood wanders everywhere too: through the tsar's chambers, and through the boyars' towers, and through poor hovels; of Falsehood the people say that she has latched onto the earth, and spreads and grinds across it, and lies and weaves her tales.

— Well, well, well! — Falsehood mutters under her breath. — So that's the holy soul on crutches that people call Truth. I'm so sick of this Truth: the moment she looks you in the face, it's as if bitter smoke eats your eyes! If only I could somehow do away with her, the wretch!

Falsehood doesn't have to go far for mischief; she had an idea at once. She hobbled over to Truth, squinting, bowed low to her, and said in a sweet little voice:

— Why haven't we seen you for so long, golden Truth? Have you grown too proud? And yet the people speak of your grace, saying that without you people cannot live, but suffer. By my poor wits, it's the other way around (forgive my truthful word): with you people suffer, but with me they live soul to soul, and our way of life goes like clockwork.

Truth looked into Falsehood's dim eyes and said:

— No, Falsehood, ill fares it for anyone who befriends you; with you you can cross the whole world, but you won't come back! A lie does not endure!

How Falsehood flew into a rage at the truthful word and, bristling all over, began to shout and hiss in all her voices:

— Look what she's come up with — that I don't endure! And do you know the saying: "Tell a lie and you won't die"? And I'll call on people to witness that it's better to live with me than with you!

Truth shook her head, said, "No!" — and went on her way. She doesn't go in for dodges and twists; she doesn't waste words; with her it's either "yes" or "no."

Falsehood latched onto Truth, hooked her with her crutch, and wouldn't let go.

— Let's, — she says, — make a wager that people get along better with me!

— Let's, — says Truth, — here are a hundred rubles. Look out, Falsehood, you'll lose the bet!

— Fine, we'll see who comes out on top! Let's go to court before a third party, to arbitration, say, to the clerk; he lives not far off.

— Let's go, — said Truth.

And off they went. Meanwhile Falsehood had slipped a wallet and a kerchief out of a passerby's pocket and hidden them in her own pocket. So they came to the clerk; Truth began to state her case, while Falsehood meanwhile showed the clerk the money and the kerchief from under her skirt. And the clerk was a man of the world, and guessed at once what to do; so he says:

— You've lost your money, Truth: in our time it's better to live by Falsehood; you'll be better fed!

There was nothing for it; Truth paid over the full hundred rubles, but still stood her ground, that it was better to live by truth.

— You're an unstoppable one! — Falsehood goaded her. — Let's make another wager: I'll stake a thousand rubles in the pot, and you, if you have no money, stake those eyes of yours.

— Very well, — said Truth.

So off they went again to seek arbitration, this time before a boyar. Having heard them out, the boyar sighed and said:

— Well, Mother Truth, you've lost your bright eyes; holy Truth is a fine thing, but it's no good for the world.

Weeping, Truth spoke a word to the boyar:

— Don't you go looking for Truth in others, boyar, when there is none in you!

And Falsehood hooked Truth with her crutch and led her out of the city. Truth walked along, shedding tear after tear: it was bitter to her that people honor her, honor her indeed, yet cannot live by truth.

So Falsehood led her out into the open field, gouged out her eyes, and gave her a shove besides, so that Truth fell face down on the ground. Having rested, she began to crawl, feeling her way, though where she was crawling to she herself did not know. So she hid in the tall marsh grass and lay there until night.

Suddenly at midnight an evil force swooped in from all sides and began boasting to one another of who had done the most harm:

— I, — says one, — set husband and wife at odds!

— I, — says another, — taught children to disobey their father and mother!

— And I, — cried a third, — spent the whole day teaching children to lie and steal sweets!

— Some marvel that is — to make a child into a thief and a liar! — cries Falsehood. — But I've outdone you all: I out-argued Truth, took a hundred rubles from her, and gouged out her eyes besides! Now Truth is blind, and has become Falsehood herself!

— Ha! — cried the chief among them. — The sandpiper is a long way off from St. Peter's Day! Truth endures; she doesn't drown in water, doesn't burn in fire; she has only to rub her eyes with eyebright and it will all lift away as if by a hand!

— But where will she get that remedy?

— There's more of that herb than you can gather on the hill, on the fallow land.

Truth lies in the sedge, listening to their words; and no sooner had the evil force scattered than she crawled uphill, to the abandoned old field, sat down on the fallow ground, and began plucking herb after herb and pressing it to her eyes. At last she reached the eyebright, rubbed one eye with it — and saw; rubbed the other — and saw with that one too!

"Good, — she thinks, — I'll gather some of this herb; perhaps others will need it too."

And she plucked a whole bundle, tied it into bunches, and carried it home.

Whether long or short, in a certain tsardom, in a certain state, the tsar's one and only daughter went blind; and everything they tried, every way they treated the tsarevna — nothing worked! The tsar ordered a proclamation made in his own realm and in the neighboring tsardoms: whoever cures his tsarevna, to him he will give half his treasury and throw in half the kingdom besides. So healers, wise women, and herb-women gathered from all sides and set to treating her; they treat and treat, but they cannot cure her!

The tsar grew angry and ordered them all swept out of the yard with a broom, while he himself began to think and ponder how to mend his sorrow. The tsar thought and thought — and thought of nothing.

The tsar marveled and ordered the nurses and nannies to bring the wondrous wise woman to the tsarevna.

Truth entered the tsarevna's little tower, prayed before the icons, bowed to the tsarevna, took out the eyebright, rubbed one eye with it — the tsarevna saw with one eye; rubbed the other — and saw with the other too, and, having regained her sight, leapt up for joy and rushed to her father's chambers, knocking, clattering, running through the passages; and after her a whole host of nurses, nannies, and chambermaids hurried in pursuit. How she ran in to her father and threw herself straight at his feet:

— Tsar and sovereign, I see you, my parent! I see more clearly than before!

The tsar wept for joy, embraced his daughter, kissed and fondled her, and himself asked after the wondrous wise woman; and Truth was already there, shining into the tsar's eyes with her truthful greeting.

— How shall I reward you, wondrous one? — asks the tsar. — Do you want treasure? Take it all! Do you want to rule? Take half the kingdom!

Truth bowed to the tsar and said:

— I have no need of your kingdom or your treasury; but if you wish to reward me, then make me your chief judge, so that without me your judges throughout the kingdom shall not settle a single case.

The tsar agreed with joy; they struck hands on the bargain — and from that time Truth dwelt in that land, replaced the unjust judges, seated the righteous, and taught them wisdom and honor; while Falsehood's lot became such that she fled from there without looking back.