



There are many different versions of this Russian tale told throughout the world. In each, a peasant girl impresses a man of importance (sometimes a tax collector, a mayor of a town, or a king) with her responses to the questions she is asked or the tasks that she is given.

The Clever Maiden

Once upon a time there lived a farmer who was so poor he didn't have enough money to pay his taxes one year. He planned on giving the czar, the powerful ruler of the land, just a small portion of what he owed now and paying the rest later. The farmer had often done this before, but his daughter said, "I don't think that will work this year, Father. I am sure the czar will want nothing less than the full amount."

When the czar arrived at the farmer's cottage to collect the tax money, he was angered that the farmer did not have all the money. "You must pay all that is due," the czar declared, "and nothing less."

The farmer hung his head. "I should have listened to my daughter," he said. "She was certain that you would accept nothing less than all the money this year."

"Is your daughter really that clever?" asked the czar.

"She is," the maiden's father replied.

"I'll tell you what I'll do, then," the czar said. "Don't worry about

the taxes for now. Tomorrow I will send over a basketful of eggs that need hatching. I, myself, will return in a week's time to collect the chicks. But if your daughter does not succeed in hatching them," he warned with a stern look, "I shall have no choice but to throw you both in prison."

The eggs arrived the next day, and the maiden examined them carefully.

She held them in her hands
and weighed them, and then saw
to her dismay that the eggs were
all hard-boiled.

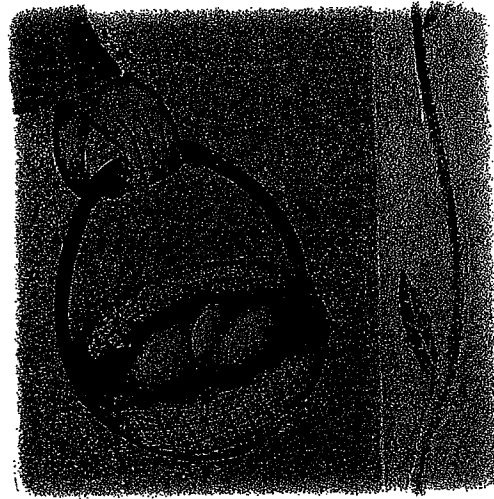
"Oh, no!" wailed the farmer. "Now we shall be thrown in prison for sure."

"Don't worry, father," the maiden replied. "It won't come to that. I'll think of something."

Well, the morning the czar was expected to pick up the chicks, the maiden boiled up a handful of dried beans. She gave them to her father and told him to work in the garden alongside the lane to their cottage. "When the czar is within earshot," the maiden went on, "be sure to call out, 'May these boiled beans grow stout and tall!'"

The farmer did as his daughter had instructed him, and as she predicted, the czar stopped his carriage, shaking his head in disbelief. "Foolish man," he cried out, "how can you think those boiled beans will ever grow?"

Recalling what his daughter had told him to say, the farmer replied, "The same way chicks will hatch from boiled eggs!" Seeing that the



maiden had not fallen for his trick, the czar threw back his head and laughed, and ordered his carriage home.

The czar was a proud man, however, and his game wasn't over yet. A week later he brought a skein of yarn to the farmer's home and ordered the maiden to weave enough cloth to clothe all his palace servants. . . or else. The farmer wrung his hands with worry, but the maiden took it all very calmly. "Don't fret, father," she said. "I'll think of something."

When the czar returned for the cloth, the maiden handed him a piece of wood. "I'll weave the cloth once you have made me a loom from this single piece of wood," she said. Once again, the czar was enchanted by the maiden's clever answer.

The czar paid a third visit to the cottage, this time with a tiny silver cup in hand. "Maiden, with this cup I would like you to empty the seas surrounding my palace so that I may have more pastureland for my animals."

The following week he smiled when the maiden presented him with a smooth stone. "I shall empty the seas surrounding your palace when you are able to block up all the rivers of the world with this one

stone," she said.

The czar was not really a heartless man, despite his position of power. From his weekly visits, he had grown to love the farmer's daughter. For her part, the maiden had also fallen in love with this man who valued her cleverness. The farmer was very pleased—and relieved!—when the czar announced that he wished to marry the maiden.

What a grand wedding it was, followed by a fabulous feast and dancing until dawn. Before the tired and happy couple went to bed, the maiden—or czarina, as she would now be called—took her husband aside and placed a piece of parchment and a pen in his hand.

“I ask just one small favor of you,” she said. “Please put in writing that, if you are ever displeased with me and ask me to leave my new home, I be allowed to take with me any one thing that I treasure above all else.”

The czar agreed to this request and wrote out the words. He signed his name to the document, then folded it and sealed it with sealing wax pressed flat with his royal ring.

Several years passed, and they were happy ones, but as married couples do everywhere, the czar and czarina quarreled one evening. In his anger, the czar shouted, “Woman, you are impossible! Get out of my sight! I wish never to see you again!”

“As you please,” the czarina replied. “But it’s late. I will pack my belongings now, but allow me to leave in the morning.”

The czar grudgingly agreed. He took his usual bedtime drink upstairs to the bed chamber, unaware that his wife had slipped a sleeping potion into the cup. When he was sound asleep, the czarina ordered that the royal carriage be readied and the czar put into it. The snoring ruler slept throughout the journey to the cottage where the maiden had once lived with her father.

When the czar awoke the next morning, he rose up in bed and looked around him. "Where am I, and who holds me here?" he demanded.

"I hold you here, dear husband," answered the czarina, entering the room. "And I hold in my hand the parchment you penned on our wedding night. May I remind you of what it says? You agreed that if ever I were to leave the palace I might take with me that which I treasured most."

"I recall your request well," the czar laughed. "And I am honored by your love. I spoke without thinking yesterday, and I apologize for my harsh words. I treasure you above all else, too."

So saying, the czar kissed his wife, and they returned to the palace, where they lived happily for many more years.

