The Piebald Horses

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Translated from Russian by Alexander Gagarine

St. Nicholas, the miracle-worker of Myra in Lycia, was a Greek by birth, though his remains, taken from Greece by the Italians, have been transferred to Bari. It is kind, simple, sinful Russia, however, that has adopted as her own his beautiful meek image and for ages Nicholas the Merciful has been her best-beloved saint and mediator. Having endowed his spiritual personality with her own homely and guileless traits, she has woven round him many legends, marvelous in their artless sincerity. Here is one of them.

Once upon a time, our Father St. Nicholas was trudging over the Russian land. His way led through towns and villages, thick woods and deep bogs, by roundabout paths and crossroads, on days of snow and rain, in bitter cold and sultry heat. There is always a great deal for him to do in our country: he has to soften the heart of a cruel ruler; denounce an unjust judge; admonish an over-greedy dealer; release an innocent captive from prison; intercede for one condemned to an unmerited death; stretch a helping hand to a drowning man; encourage those in despair; comfort the widow; find a home for the orphan.

Our people are weak and ignorant, and live in darkness; they are covered and overgrown with sin as an old wayside stone is coated with dirt and overgrown with moss. To whom can we turn, in deep trouble, in sickness, at the hour of death? God is too distant and awe-inspiring, and how dare one trouble the Heavenly Mother with the loathsome ills of mankind? All the other saints and confessors have their special duties—they are too busy, all of them, all save St. Nicholas, who is our very own, neither fastidious nor distant; simple, ready, accessible to all. That is the reason why not only the orthodox Christians come to him with their petitions and prayers but all other nations—Tartars even—honour and respect him. People as wicked as bandits and horse-thieves, even they venture to trouble him with their prayers.

And so St. Nicholas was tramping over wide old Russia when suddenly a heavenly messenger appeared to him.

“You have pushed so deep into this wilderness, Holy Father, that it was hard work finding you and meanwhile all your church affairs are being neglected and a frightful disaster is at hand. Wicked Arius-the-Giant has risen against Orthodoxy, trampling the holy books and reviling the holy rites. He boasts loudly that on Holy Week he, Arius-the-Giant, will step into the centre of the Nikitsky Cathedral and before the whole congregation, he will overthrow the true faith. … Hasten, Father Nicholas, to the rescue. There is no hope save in you.”

“I will go,” spoke the Blessed Saint.

“Do not tarry, dear one! There is so little time left and you know yourself the distance is long.”

“I will start today, now, directly. You can fly away in peace.”

The Blessed Saint knew a stage-driver named Vassily, a God-fearing man and a first-rate driver. A better one could not be found for such a long journey. To him the Saint repaired.

“Dress yourself, Vassily, give your horses a good drink, and off we go!”

Vassily didn’t even inquire if they were going far, for well he knew that if the business had been near at hand the Saint would have gone on foot and spared the horses.

So Vassily said:

“All right, Holy Father. Sit down in my isba for a minute, while I harness the horses.”

That winter the snow was oh! so deep, and the road had scarcely been laid yet. Vassily harnessed three horses tandem fashion: the first was a small roan horse, which age had plentifully speckled with white, a cunning little animal and wonderfully good at remembering the way; behind it came a black mare—dependable but lazy—who needed the whip as much as she needed her oats; while between the shafts was a home-bred bay mare, meek and hardworking, Mashka by name.

Vassily packed the sledge with straw, covered it with sacking, and, after helping in the Saint, settled himself on the front seat in true Russian fashion: one leg in the sledge, and the other hanging outside, to serve as brake on the sharp turns. He had six lines made of ropes in his hands, and two whips; a shortish one, tucked into his boot, and a long one, which he held in his hand, letting the lash trail far behind the sledge, where it traced a winding pattern on the snow.

Vassily’s troika was by no means showy, but you couldn’t have found a better one. The two front horses had little bells tied to their collars, chosen to jingle in tune, while under the douga the shaft horse had a Valda bell with a mellower tone. The noise they made could be heard for five versts round; everybody could tell that the travellers were honest folks who had nothing to hide. Looking at the horses you wouldn’t have thought much of them; yet, in the long run, the most celebrated trotters couldn’t have kept up with them. The little white horse ran with its head held low, watching the snow; where the road took a turn it did not need the rein to know which way to go. Vassily sometimes dozed on his seat, but even dozing he was on the alert and if the little bells jingled out of tune with the larger shaft bell,

he was awake in a second. Should one of the horses shirk its bit, or not pull honestly, or let the others do its work, Vassily would immediately remind it of its duty with his whip, and should one of them take too much on itself, a jerk of the lines would damp its ardour and things would run smoothly again. The horses' gait was even and steady, they might have been wound-up mechanisms; only their ears occasionally twitched back. And the little bells jingled in tune on the long snowy road.

Several times they met robbers. Suddenly, from under a bridge, would appear some young highwaymen and bar the way:

"Stop! Pull up your horses, driver! Whom have you there? A rich nobleman? A prosperous trader? A fat priest? ..."

And Vassily would answer:

"Open your eyes, you stupid louts! Can't you see who sits there?"

The bandits would look closer and fling themselves on their knees.

"Forgive us, scoundrels that we are, Blessed Saint! What fools to have made such a mistake! Forgive us—be merciful!"

"God will forgive," would answer St. Nicholas. "Still, you should not attack, and rob, and kill people. Fearful will be the answer you will have to give in the next world!"

"Oh, we are sinners, Father, desperate sinners ... But you, Most Merciful One, remember us, vile wretches, in your prayers ... And may you travel in peace."

"Peace to you, too, in your camp, dear robbers."

Thus did Vassily drive the Saint for many days and nights. They stopped to feed the horses at the houses of other stage-drivers, friends of Vassily's—he had friends and acquaintances everywhere. Thus they passed through the government of Saratov, through the lands given to the colonists, through little Russia, and beyond, where foreign lands began.

Meanwhile, Arius-the-Giant had come forth from his lofty mansion and stooping, put his ear to the damp ground. He listened long, then rose, blacker than a thunder cloud, and called his servants:

"My men, my faithful men! I felt that St. Nicholas was on his way here, and it is Vassily, the stage-driver, who is bringing him. If Nicholas should arrive before Holy Week, we are lost—all of us—like so many black beetles. Do all you can—do all you know how—to delay him for

a day or two. If you don't, I will have your heads cut off. Not one shall escape. But the one who is smart enough to do my bidding, I will cover with gold and precious stones and give as wife my only, my beautiful daughter, Heresy."

And the servants ran, they flew, to carry out his orders.

Meanwhile Vassily and the Saint were crossing foreign lands. The population was queer and uncivil and wouldn't speak Russian. They were tattered and swarthy, with faces that looked as if they had been scraped and eyes that glared from under their brows like the eyes of wolves.

One day's journey away. Tomorrow they would be at the Nikitsky Cathedral in time for Mass. They stopped for the night in a village, in the isba of the local stage-driver—a stern man, rough and unsociable.

The travellers asked for oats to feed the horses.

"I haven't any oats left," was the answer.

"Never mind, Vassily," said the Saint. "Just take the empty bag from under the seat and shake it into the manger."

Vassily obeyed and from the bag poured heavy, golden wheat. It filled the mangers.

The travellers then asked for food. The man answered by signs that he had none to give them.

"Well," said the Saint, "if there is nothing there's nothing to be done. Have you any bread left, Vassily?"

"Yes, Father, a little crust, but it is very stale."

"Never mind—we will crumble it into water and we shall call it a broth."

After supper, they said their prayers and lay down to sleep—the Saint on a bench and Vassily on the floor. The Saint fell asleep as sweetly as a baby, but Vassily could not sleep. His heart was uneasy … Finally he got up and went to have a look at his horses. He entered the stables and then rushed out, trembling and haggard with fright, and woke the Saint.

"Father Nicholas, do get up! Come with me to the stables and see what a misfortune has befallen us."

They went to the stables—you could just barely see in the early dawn—and the Saint looked in astounded: the three horses were lying on the ground all hacked to pieces, here the legs and there the heads, here the necks and there the bodies! Vassily was howling—very dear were his horses to him.

The Saint spoke to him kindly:

“Never mind, Vassily, never mind! Don’t complain and don’t despair. This trouble can be remedied. Here—take the pieces and put them together as they were when the horses were alive.”

Vassily obeyed; he put the heads to the necks and the necks and legs to the bodies and waited for what would come of it.

The Holy Saint just said a short prayer and lo! the horses sprang to their feet, hale and strong, as if nothing had happened, tossing their manes, prancing and whinnying for food. Vassily fell on his knees before the Saint.

They left before daybreak; the sun rose after they had started on their way and soon they could see it shining on the cross above the Nikitsky belfry. But the Saint noticed that Vassily, sitting on the box, kept bending right and left over his horses.

“What is the matter, Vassily?”

“Why, Holy Father, I can’t make it out … My horses seem to have changed their coats. They used to be all of one color, and now they are piebald, like calves! Is it possible that in that bad light, and hurrying as I did, I got the pieces mixed up? It doesn’t look right to me somehow …”

“Never mind, Vassily, don’t worry and don’t fuss. Let it be. And please hurry on, dear one, hurry … We mustn’t be late.”

And really, they were almost late. The liturgy was half way through in the Nikitsky Cathedral. Arius stepped out on the altar-steps, huge as a mountain, in gold brocaded vestments, covered with diamonds, crowned with a double-horned gold tiara, and started reading the Creed the wrong way:

“I believe neither in the Father, nor in the Son, nor in the Holy Ghost …” and so on, to the end. But just as he was going to conclude “Not Amen,” the door opened wide and St. Nicholas walked hurriedly in.

He had just jumped out of the sledge, and thrown off his travelling greatcoat. Bits of straw

were still sticking in his hair, in his little gray beard and to his worn cassock … Rapidly the Saint approached the altar steps. No—he did not strike Arius-the-Giant on the cheek—that isn't true; he did not even lift his hand; he only gazed wrathfully at him. The giant reeled, tottered, and would have fallen, had not his servants caught him under the arms. He never concluded his wicked prayer and could only mutter:

"Take me out … I want fresh air … it is stifling here … Oh! I feel—I know—there is something wrong in the pit of my stomach."

He was taken out of the Church, into the little cathedral garden, and laid under a tree, where his end came. And so he died without penitence.

From that time on, Vassily always kept piebald horses. And everyone got to know that such horses were the most enduring and that their legs were as hard as iron.