THE FAIR AT SOROCHINTSI

A NIKOLAI GOGOL story retold and illustrated by DEBORAH RAY
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The sun is bright, and so is the face of Paraska, the poor farmer's beautiful daughter, as she minglesthe fair-going crowds at Sorochints'i. Since everyman and his brother are there, this is a perfect place for a lass to seek romance, and it does not take long for Paraska to find the young man of her dreams.

However, as things often go in life—and always in a tale worth telling—their happiness meets an agonizing obstacle. When Paraska's sour-tongued stepmother wrecks the marriage plans, apparently the devil himself, with the help of a troupe of gypsies, creates confusion and comedy, playing the role of cupid to good purpose possibly for the first and only time.

The robust humor of Nikolai Gogol's rollicking folktale is caught in carnival colors by a talented new artist.
THE FAIR AT SOROCHINTS'I

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One hot day in August the road to Sorochintsy was crowded with people hurrying to the fair. As soon as the sun appeared in the sky, the peasants for miles around piled their wagons high with anything they could offer for sale. There were fruits, vegetables, pots, window panes, belts, skirts, embroideries, geese, chickens—but why go on? To the rim of the earth stretched the line of wagons. It was said that if a man saved his kopecks for a
hundred times a hundred years, he would not have enough to buy all there was at that fair.

At the side of the road, apart from all the rest, a team of oxen dragged a wagon stacked high with hemp, linen and bright-colored pots. This load was followed by a gray-haired old man leading a weary mare he was taking to be sold. Many of the passersby, especially the young men, smiled and took off their caps as they passed this wagon. The reason for their courtesy was plain to see, for on the wagon sat a pretty, round-faced girl whose brown eyes sparkled with wonder as she looked from one amazing sight to another. Seeing her smiling face, none of the passersby could guess how many tears she had shed before her father had allowed her to come, although he would have consented earlier if he did not fear a drubbing from her spiteful stepmother, who sat beside her on top of the load.

This lady was dressed in a spotted blouse and a skirt printed in very large flowers. On her head she wore a flowered kerchief, which only made her scowling face look even more savage. It was no wonder that everyone preferred to look at the lively face of her stepdaughter.
The young girl was so enchanted by all the sights of the fair that she even forgot to crack the sunflower seeds she had been eating. Suddenly, looking around, she saw a young cossack beside the wagon. Reaching down, he plucked a wild flower from the grass at the side of the road and offered it to her.

"Please take this," he said, looking right at the blushing girl, who could not help but admire so handsome a fellow.

Her stepmother scowled indignantly at the young man, for she believed that this compliment should have been paid to her own charm and beauty.
“Plague take you, you rascal!” she screamed. “May you crack your head on a pot!”

“Just listen to her,” said the young man. “Did you ever hear the like from an old woman? She must be a hundred if she is a day!”

“A hundred!” the stepmother exclaimed, flushing. “Go and wash your mouth, you worthless scamp. A hundred indeed!”

The stepmother was seething with rage, but by this time the wagon was far away from the cossack lad. She kept on muttering “A plague take him!” until they reached the outskirts of the village and the home of their old friend Tsibulya, where they intended to rest after their long journey.
Others in the procession had halted here too, and not a few confided that they had spent a sleepless night thinking of certain stories of the devil’s work that had been done at the fair on past occasions. Old man Cherevik, the beauty’s father, could not quite remember the reports of what the devil had done, but he hoped the Evil One would not be visiting the fair again.

After they had eaten and rested for a while, the old man and his daughter went to the fair.
What a turmoil of sound was the fair at Sorochintsi! Shouting, bellowing, bleating, laughing—all blending into one clamor! Oxen, hay, gypsies, pots, cakes, peasants—everything bustling and rushing!

When the peasant and his daughter arrived, it could be seen that she was anxious to be away from the sheds where her father was discussing the price of mares. She preferred the stalls where ribbons, earrings and bright-colored dresses were shown, but even here her attention was distracted by other amusing sights.

As she was watching a dancing bear, she felt someone pull at her sleeve. She turned and saw the bright-eyed young cossack.

"Don't be frightened," he said in a whisper, taking her hand. "I won't say anything to hurt you."

The peasant looked around and was about to speak to his daughter when he heard the word "devil" spoken by two corn dealers. He was so anxious to join their discussion that he did not even notice his daughter and the young man holding hands and talking as if they had known each other all their lives.

"Ah, neighbor, we shall never be able to sell our wheat now," said one of these men.

"Not with the devilry that's about here, and that's certain!" said the other morosely.

"And what kind of devilry is that?" asked our beauty's father.

"Do you see that dilapidated barn at the foot of the hill?" asked
the first man. "All kinds of devilish tricks go on in that barn, and not a single fair has been held in that spot without some kind of trouble. Haven't you heard that the district clerk was passing it last night when all of a sudden a pig's snout looked out of the window and grunted so loudly that it sent a shiver down his back? The devil has appeared in that guise more than once. That red jacket will be seen again too, you can be certain!"
When he heard these words, our old friend's hair stood on end. But he was soon distracted by the sight of his daughter and the young man standing with their arms around each other and not caring whether red jackets or blue jackets had been seen.

"Well, Paraska," said the old man, angrily turning to his daughter, "I see you know how to make good use of your time."

"It is my fault, Solopy," said the cossack. "You see, your daughter and I are ready to spend the rest of our lives together."

"Indeed," said the father, "And why do you call me by my name? Who are you?"

"I am Gritzko, your old friend Golepupenko's son. How often
I have heard my father speak of Solopy Cherevik—of what a fine horseman he is! A real cossack."

"You are indeed the son of your father," said Cherevik, "and if you love my daughter you shall have her."

Gritzko was so overjoyed on hearing this that he excused himself hastily and went off immediately to buy wedding presents for his in-laws and his bride.
But when Cherevik and Paraska told the news to the stepmother, she flew into a rage. "You had better spend your time selling your wheat, you old fool. A fine husband you chose for your daughter—a young scamp who insults your wife right before your stuffy nose! I would rather she marry the devil himself!"

And she ranted on until old Cherevik put his hands over his ears to shut out her shrill voice.

"There goes the wedding!" old Cherevik said to himself. "Now I shall have to refuse that good fellow for no reason whatever."
Sitting by his wagon, Gritzko gazed sadly at the peasants and gypsies putting away their wares for the night.

"What ails you, Gritzko?" a tall Gypsy asked.

"Old Cherrevik gave me his word that I could marry his daughter, and now he has taken it back because his old witch of a wife got angry when I called her an old witch."

"If we make Cherrevik give you Paraska, will you sell me your oxen for twenty rubles?" asked the Gypsy.

Gritzko did not trust the Gypsy, but he felt that any chance of winning Paraska was worth while.

"You may have them for fifteen if you can do that," said Gritzko, "but don't try to trick me!"

"Good, let us shake hands on the bargain!" said the Gypsy.
At the fair there were rumors that a certain red jacket had been seen among the stalls. An old woman claimed she had seen the devil in the shape of a pig rooting about a wagon, and this news soon spread to every part of the camp. Everyone believed it in spite of the fact that the old woman was known to be addled and half blind. This incident, added to the story of the clerk who had seen the pig in the tumbledown barn, soon had all the people huddling together too terrified to sleep. In the face of this danger, Cherevik and his daughter decided to go back to his friend Tsibulya's house for the night. A group of peasants soon gathered there to discuss the situation.
“It is all a trick,” said Tsibulya with a great show of bravado. “Someone is playing a trick on us. Even if it were the devil—who’s the devil? If he were right in this room, I’d make a long nose at him. Like this.”

“Why did you turn so pale, then, when you heard the story?” asked a visitor.

“He is not pale now,” said another, “He is as red in the face as the devil himself.”

“What is this about a red jacket?” asked Cherevik. “I keep asking about this jacket and I don’t get a sensible answer from anyone.”
“It is not a story to tell on a dark night,” said Tsibulya, “but since all of you people are so anxious, I’ll tell you.”

Clearing his throat, Tsibulya began, “Once upon a time the devil came to this town dressed as a man.”

“If he was dressed as a man, then how do you know he was the devil?” asked Cherevik.

“Because he wore this red jacket. It was so red it glowed like fire,” said Tsibulya impatiently. “Let me get on with this story. Well, the devil was very fond of the ladies, and he began to court all of them. In fact, he bought so many things at the fair for the fair ones he courted that he soon was penniless. He had not even a kopeck for bread.”

“He must have been a very stupid devil,” said Cherevik.

“Be that as it may, the devil needed money. In desperation, he obtained money for his jacket from a pawnbroker, promising to come back and reclaim it within a year. But the pawnbroker was too greedy to wait a year, and after several weeks he sold it to a gentleman for fifty rubles. Within the year, the devil did come back to demand his red jacket.

“What jacket? I have no jacket!” said the pawnbroker.

“The devil walked away. But that night, as the pawnbroker was shutting his shop, he looked up, and there were pig snouts at every window.”
“What was that?” exclaimed Cherevik fearfully, thinking he had heard a strange noise.

“What was what?” asked Tsibulya, annoyed at the interruption. At that moment they all heard a sound like the grunt of a pig. Everyone went pale. Those who dared searched every corner of the room.

“What a brave band of cossacks you are!” said Tsibulya’s wife. “A blind man could see there is no one in this room but us. Are we to run for cover every time a chair squeaks? Come, let us get on with the story.”
Ashamed to have appeared so cowardly, Tsibulya went on. “The pawnbroker was so terrified by those apparitions that he confessed how he had sold the jacket. Unfortunately, the gentleman who had bought it had been robbed of it by a Gypsy, who then sold it to a woman at the Sorochintsi fair. However, since the woman could sell nothing at the fair, she decided that it must be the fault of the jacket, which was stiflingly hot, and she flung it into the fire. But the devilish thing would not burn.

“Frightened, she gave the jacket to a dealer in butter.

“That jacket is a gift from the devil!” he exclaimed, taking an axe and chopping it to bits. But no matter how hard he chopped, the bits came together again and formed a whole jacket.

“Crossing himself, the butter dealer at last managed to tear the jacket into pieces, and these he scattered all over the fair.

“Ever since, whenever there is a fair, the devil wanders around the marketplace with the face of a pig, collecting the pieces of his jacket. Now only the left sleeve is missing, and folks say that this place is——”

The rest of the sentence was lost, because at that moment there was a rapping at the window, the panes crashed to the floor, and a pig’s face looked through the broken glass.
Everyone froze with terror. Tsibulya’s eyes almost popped out of his head. In a frenzy of terror he crept under his wife’s skirts to hide. As for Cherevik, he clapped a pot on his head instead of his hat and streaked out the door like a cat whose tail has been stepped on.

“The devil! The devil!” he screamed, running around in circles until at last, exhausted, he fell into the hay in Tsibulya’s barn.
In the light of morning, the tale of the red jacket did not seem quite so alarming, and the fair once more resumed its bustle and its noise.

Cherevik would have much preferred to take his mare, his hemp and all his goods back to the safety of his own home and away from the devilry at the Sorochintsy fair, but his screaming wife was not to be ignored.

"Get up, get up!" she shouted in his ear. "Get up and take the mare to market! Here it is the second day and all you have done is behave like the old fool that you are. Go along or you will leave here without selling so much as a handful of hemp."
She continued to shout angry words at him even as he led his tired old mare down the road to the fair.

"A fine chance I have of selling this mare now!" said Cherevik through his chattering teeth as he grasped the bridle of the mare. "That cursed devil is too restless."

Busy with his troubled thoughts, Cherevik was plodding along toward the marketplace when suddenly a tall Gypsy stood in his way.
"What are you selling, old man?" asked the Gypsy.

"It is plain to see what I am selling," replied Cherevik angrily.

"A bridle?" asked the Gypsy.

"Yes, a bridle and the mare." Cherevik raised his arm to bring the mare forward, but instead of the mare there was only a severed bridle—and tied to the bridle there was a red sleeve.

Aghast with horror, Cherevik ran away screaming like a mad man.

"Stop him, stop him!" shouted the Gypsy.

Several young lads grabbed at Cherevik and held him.

"Tie him up," said the Gypsy. "This man is a horse thief."
“You must be daft,” sputtered Cherevik. “It is my mare that is gone!”

“This man stole a mare from the peasant Cherevik,” said the Gypsy, pointing to Cherevik.

“May my legs whither if I have stolen anything!” cried Cherevik. “I am Cherevik.”

“A likely story,” said the Gypsy. “Why, then, were you running as if the devil were chasing you? Tie him and take him to the assessor!”
Scoffing at his protests and his cries about red sleeves and devils, the young men tied the shaking Cherevik and marched him off down the road toward the assessor’s hut when a young cossack appeared from among the crowd. “Why are you tied up like that, good friend?” asked Gritzko with great concern.

“I have been punished for having wronged you, good lad,” sobbed Cherevik. “Only tell them that I am Cherevik, and maybe they believe that I did not steal my mare from myself.”

“I will tell them,” said Gritzko, winking at the young men, “if you will promise to let me marry Paraska.”

“Nothing could please me more,” said Cherevik. “The devil take my wife—tomorrow we will celebrate the wedding!”

“Then run along home now, father-in-law,” said Gritzko, untying the old man. “Your mare has been found and people are waiting there to buy her.”

Trembling with happiness, the old man set off, too excited even to think how he should explain these new developments to his wife.

“Well, Gritzko my lad,” said the Gypsy, “I did as I promised. Paraska is yours, and now you must keep your part of the bargain.”

“Take the oxen! Take them with my blessing,” said Gritzko, “but be careful the devil does not snatch them away!” And both friends laughed so hard that they had to hold each other up to keep from collapsing with laughter.
The next day Paraska and Gritzko were married, and what a wedding it was! The sheep bleated, the cows mooed, the fiddlers played, and everyone whirled and danced about so happily that the devil and his sleeve were completely forgotten.
DEBORAH RAY, who studied at the Philadelphia College of Art, the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, the Albert Barnes Foundation and the University of Pennsylvania, has exhibited her work in many art shows. In 1967 she received the Mabel Rush Homer Award of Woodmere Art Gallery and a Louis Comfort Tiffany Foundation grant. She lives with her sculptor husband and two small daughters in the Germantown area of Philadelphia, and intends to make her career as an illustrator of books for children. The story adaptation and illustrations for The Fair at Sorochintsy is her first such contribution.