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Gramarye

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THE CHICHESTER CENTRE FOR FAIRY TALES FANTASY AND SPECULATIVE FICTION

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Teaching Excellence Framework

Roman Kazimierz Kochanowski,
suburban winter landscape
(between 1890 and 1900).

The Shoemaker of Siberia

KG Mach

Poland has not yet perished,
As long as we still live.

When the army came, they took. They burned. They brutalised. The army thought that the people would die, that their wills would snap like straw, and the land and all its resources would be theirs. But the people would not be erased so completely. The spirits of the land made sure of that.

A farmer looked up from his haying and saw the tanks. He motioned for his young son to jump down from the wagon and hide. Fields of barley and oat, sown with patience and care, churned and crushed beneath the treads of war. The sharp scent of oil and gasoline stung his nose. Then the screams and the slaughter began.

By the time the farmer reached his home, his wife, three smaller children, and most of his neighbours were dead.

Across the nation the blood of the people soaked into the fields, and the ancient spirits of the land, who loved their precious people, felt themselves cleaved in two. Hundreds of souls to guide home pulled them in one direction, while the plight of the survivors tugged their hearts in another.

The farmer, his boy, and those who survived were torn from their homes and exiled to a frozen sleeping land.

As the chuffing smoke of the cattle train pushed across the countryside, ferrying those left to a new land, ancient spirits rose from the trampled fields and pursued their beloveds, trying to get them back. They rapped on the boxcar doors that would not budge. They peered through the small grated windows and watched their people grow sick with hunger and cold. The spirits kept pace with the train, determined to stay with their people, but then the bodies began to fall.

With each body tossed from the train like useless bags of rubbish, a spirit peeled off to guide a loved one home.

Soon only the smallest of spirits remained. It clung to the side of the last cattle car, refusing to let go, as its brothers and sisters were torn away by the roars of war, wind and snow. Lips and fingers blue, it pulled itself up to a window. At the same time, the small

hand of the farmer's one surviving son reached through the bars to break off an icicle and quench a thirst.

Spirit and human touched. Possibility opened.

The spirit grabbed hold of the little hand. The boy could not see the spirit, but he felt it, in his heart, where all our thoughts run true. "Hold on," communed the small spirit. "All is not yet lost."

The spirit reached into her broken crown of wheat and rye, and pulled out a piece with but three kernels left. It was all that she had to give. The spirit, feeling the tug of time, placed the wheat into the child's hand and closed his fist around it. "Take this with you," she told his heart. "The first two kernels will bring hope in a time of need. The third will call us to you when all is truly lost. If hope is gone, place a kernel in the moonlight and help you shall receive. God speed."

Then the spirit was torn away.

In the frozen land of winter, the exiled families starved and somehow lived. They were thousands of miles from home near a forest of dark, chill winds and a river thick with ice that extinguished any thought of escape.

The people were assigned jobs. Who they were before did not matter.

"You will be what I want you to be," commanded a sergeant with eyes of steel.

The farmer's son dreamt of home often. He kept the wheat with its three precious kernels in his innermost pocket. He never did tell his father what he had. He feared he would not be believed. Hope became a cruelty people could not afford, so they did not think of it.

In time, the boy learned a new language and was given a new name to worship. The name tasted strange and bitter in his mouth, so he said it, but never with his heart. As he pledged to a new father and new nation, he could feel the spirit's gift of wheat warm against his cold skin.

Each day, while his son went to school to memorise, recite, and be re-educated, the farmer trudged out into the brutal snow to fell trees for a war machine. At night he returned and made shoes for the soldiers, replacing a comrade who had died. Ten hours in the forest and another five in the workroom. As days dragged on, hungry and demoralised, the farmer knew he could not keep the pace for long. So he agreed to an impossible task.

"Papa," said his boy that important night as they shared a bowl of watery soup. "Will you come back to the barracks before I sleep?" He refused to call the room they shared with five other families a home.

"No, my son. I have to make a very important pair of boots tonight. They must be ready for tomorrow. I will be back with the dawn."

"And then you will go out again to cut the trees?"

"Yes, my son. Now run along now before you are missed and questions are asked." The boy knew here in the land of frozen hopes questions were not good. Questions got you disappeared or dead. He handed his father the last crust of bread, then leaned close and whispered, "They're still with us, Papa."

"Who?"

"Spirits from home," said the boy and patted his father's pocket, tucking a precious kernel of wheat inside.

The farmer smiled, but it did not reach his eyes or fill the hollow of his cheeks. He would not take hope from his child, so he spoke a lie of comfort instead. "You keep praying to them, my son. They are bound to hear you."

But the farmer knew. He had seen the land ripped and torn, the sacred spaces destroyed, the bodies tossed and discarded from the train. His wife. His daughter. His two sons. All gone. "Now, off to bed with you." He hugged his child, thin and made smaller by near starvation, and sent him on his way.

Exhausted and hungry, the farmer lay his jacket by the workbench, and the kernel of wheat bounced, unnoticed, to the floor where it shimmered once and split. He cut out the pieces of leather and laid them on the table. When his vision blurred with sleep, he thought of his son. The eyes that were too large, the ribs that were too prominent, the hands that were always cold.

He pinched himself awake. This pair of boots would bring extra rations. The swift-fisted sergeant wanted them, and wanted them before anyone else in line.

But sir, I have five other orders to fill.

Make my boots by tomorrow and your son will have extra rations. Fail and he will starve this week.

Patrols passed hour after hour, inching the clock toward midnight. The other shoemakers left for bed while the farmer measured, pinned, and fed the leather through the machine. He treadled and sewed as moonlight crept slowly across the floor, illuminating the open grain of wheat. When his eyes burned with tiredness, he rubbed them with snow. When his head nodded, he poked himself with an awl.

By three in the morning, he could no longer stay awake.

Only one boot had a sole.

"Farmer! Wake up!" a fellow shoemaker said. "The inspection is coming. It's morning. Have you finished the boots?"

The farmer panicked, but when he looked at his table, there were the sergeant's boots, fully formed and buffed to shine. He rubbed his eyes. "I don't understand."

The other shoemakers clapped him on the back. "They'll let you live, to starve another day."

"Well done, comrade."

But the farmer only scratched his head and stared at the boots in wonder.

When the sergeant appeared, the farmer proudly handed him the boots. They were some of the finest work he had ever done, even if he could only remember half of it.

The sergeant's grey eyes flashed. He flicked them out of the farmer's hands. "Those are not my size."

"They are. I used your footprint exactly."

"Fool!" said the sergeant, slapping him across the face. "My feet are much smaller than that."

Keeping eyes to the ground the farmer lifted the boots. "Perhaps they only appear large because they shine so. Try them on and you will see." They were finer than any he had ever made. Finer even than the other shoemakers' work.

The sergeant knocked them away. "Make them a smaller size, ready for tomorrow." The farmer paled at the thought of another sleepless night. "And what of the extra rations for my boy?"

"No rations today," snapped the sergeant, "for you or your boy." He turned to go and paused, a cruel grin lifting one side of his face. "If you can make me three pairs instead of one by tomorrow morning, the boy may have his double rations. If not, tomorrow he goes to the forest to harvest the trees."

"But he is still a boy."

"A boy who gets too much for free. Three identical pairs of boots. By morning."

The farmer worked through the day, fighting the cold with each cut of wood. At night he returned to the workshop, took the boots apart, cut the leather down a size and cut out the shapes for two more pairs, knowing all the while they would be too small.

His son appeared at the window, "Papa," and offered a small crust of bread. The farmer kissed his son once on each cheek and held his forehead to his own and silently prayed. How he hoped he would see his child again, but he did not say this. Instead, he said, "Go, my son, before you are missed." When the farmer turned away, the boy slid the second kernel onto the sill, where it shimmered in a pool of moonlight.

The farmer sat at the worktable, the impossible task before him. "Please," he whispered, lifting his eyes to the heavens. "Help me sew fast and strong."

He had no faith the smaller boots would fit, but he had to try to make all three. As evening wore on, and moonlight crept across the floor, the farmer knew that tomorrow there would not be three pairs of boots, or even one. Miracles did not happen more than once, and that's what the first pair of boots had been. Something, or someone, had stepped in last night and finished the job for him. They had saved him, only for him to die the next day.

The farmer hoped that his death would be swift and his son would not pay a consequence. He prayed for the bullet and not the beating that he had seen so many others endure.

Hours wore on and he worked and cried the silent tears of those who have nothing left. They dripped onto the leather and the back of his hand as he pulled stitches tight along a seam. His fingers grew numb, and he remembered the laughter of his children and his wife in summer fields of wheat. "Come play, Papa!"

"Not now," said the farmer, swinging his scythe from side to side. "I have work, a harvest to cut."

"Come with us," beckoned his wife. And then beside him he saw his son with the too big eyes and too cold hands. "No," said the farmer. "I need to finish," but the real farmer had fallen fast asleep, the smell of sunshine and the buzzing of bees drifting around him.

The kernel of wheat bounced to the floor and opened.

He awoke to the sound of rushing feet. "Wake up! Wake up! The sergeant is coming!" The farmer tumbled off his stool to the floor.

"Shoemaker! Where are my boots?"

The farmer stood and hung his head. "I did not finish them, sir." The sergeant backhanded him. The farmer stumbled into the worktable, knocking precious tools and leather to the floor.

"Then what are those there?" His steely eyes sharpened to suspicious slits. "And how did you make all three?"

The farmer's blurry eyes found the table. He could not form a response. How could it be that all three pairs of boots were there?

But then his heart sank. He knew with one look at the sergeant's feet that the boots would never fit. They were two sizes too small.

"Guards!" said the sergeant, striking the table with his gloves. "Bring the shoemaker." He grinned. "I wish to test your handiwork by the river. Each pair must fit."

The farmer nodded, resigned to his fate. Executions happened by the river. "Sir, might I have those rations first? My son has not eaten for two days."

The sergeant smiled and scraped his fingernail along the farmer's trembling jaw. "I think," he said, "that we should bring the child, too. Let him see what happens when a worker fails. It will be a great lesson to him."

When they reached the length of field beside the still-frozen river, the morning sun shone and worked at melting the snow. Long grasses, bent from the months-long blanket of winter, arced their backs and slowly lifted their heads. The farmer's heart clenched. The awakening of spring had always been his favourite time of year. It was no less beautiful in the land of exiles.

The sergeant tugged on the first pair of boots. The farmer hugged his son, then pushed the boy safely behind him. The sergeant's face pinched with the pain of the too-tight toes. "Fool!" he cried and threw the remaining pairs at the farmer's head. "These are too small! You have wasted precious time and resources." He levelled his pistol at the farmer's chest. The farmer squeezed his son's hand. "When I tell you, run across the ice to the other side."

"But, Papa –"

"Do as I say."

"Back. Onto the ice," said the sergeant.

The farmer, with his hands held in front, backed slowly onto the ice, his son a step or two behind him.

The sergeant advanced as well.

"Papa," said the boy tugging on the farmer's coat. "The snow is melting. The spirits are here."

"Yes," said the farmer sadly without turning around. "Why don't you go to them, my son?" He lifted his hands wide and high, making the target bigger. The sergeant drew back the hammer. "Now, my child. Run. Run to your spirits."

The sergeant steadied his arm as a sly grin slid into place. His finger pulled tight around the trigger. "I am going to enjoy this, shoemaker." Then he swung his arm to the left, aiming at the fleeing boy.

"No!" shouted the farmer.

The boy turned to look back, a shining kernel in his hand, and slipped hard on the ice. The shot pierced the air above his head and a mighty crack echoed across the length of the river. The smoke of the pistol drifted downwind. The farmer clasped his hands to his chest and cried as his boy scrambled safely to the other side.

The sergeant wiped an angry hand across his face, and stretched his arm out again, this time aiming at the farmer. He spat on the ground and cocked the pistol a second time. Then he twitched and swatted at his ear. Something buzzed around him and stung him on the face and hands.

"Papa! Run!"

The farmer did not waste a moment. He slipped and slid across the ice as fast as he could.

"Halt!" yelled the sergeant, charging onto the ice. He fired his pistol and the ice gave a mighty crack. Large pieces heaved upward, harsh angles pointing to the sky, revealing the rushing water underneath. The farmer tumbled forward and slid onto a full sheet of ice.

"Papa!" yelled the boy. The farmer scrambled to his feet. The ice cracked with every step he took, but he continued to run.

The sergeant, clinging to a large chunk of ice in the middle of the now open river, lowered his weapon and took aim a third time. The farmer leapt to the riverbank and threw himself over his boy as pistol fire cracked the air in two. A torrent of water rushed down the river – a plough furrowing a field of ice. The giant chunks pushed and jammed against one other. They tipped, tumbled, and flipped until the sergeant was dumped into the rushing winter waters and buried beneath the flow of ice.

On the opposite bank of the river, the farmer and his boy stood in a field of springtime flowers. The river quieted and the boy reached out his hand to touch the passing bees.

"My child," said the farmer, weeping and cupping the boy's face in his hands. "My precious one. The spirits never left us, did they?"

"I told you, Papa." The boy pulled the bit of straw from his pocket, all that was left of the wheat the spirit had gifted him. He had dropped the third and final kernel onto the ice. "They came to us when we were in need."

The farmer looked across the bank of the river. "And what of those we've left behind?" But who could say? It was a question that did not have an answer. Not yet, anyway.

The boy split the bit of wheat straw in two, tying one around his wrist and one around his father's. Then he took his father's hand and led him away from the river. "Come, Papa. It's time we find our way home."

. . . . . .

KG Mach

Cover image: Stephen Reid, "Bear us swiftly, Boat of Mananan, to the Garden of the Hesperides", in T.W. Rolleston *et al.*, *The High Deeds of Finn and other Bardic Romances of Ancient Ireland.*

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