

BISHOP JOHANSEN RESCUES
A LOST SOUL:
A TALE OF PLEASANT GROVE

Steven L. Peck

-0-

The grizzly, white-bearded weaver was as silent as the shadow of a ring-tailed civet cat—“reserved,” the folks in Pleasant Grove called the Russian. He did capable work making small throw rugs on a yew loom he’d constructed himself shortly after his arrival. He sold them out of his house. If you came by for one of his creations and knocked on his door, his wife would silently lead you into the foyer and in serviceable English politely tell you to wait while she retrieved her husband. The small woman was young and likely twenty years his junior. She was thoughtfully demure, rarely speaking beyond what was necessary, but it seemed a more natural reticence than the wooden stoicism of her husband. She wore a blue kerchief on her head and a long, black wool dress bordered on the bottom with a red and blue flaxen band. Her blouse was muslin with colorful red flowers garnishing its simplicity. Her shoes were thick and blocky. She never looked you in the eye and there was an oppressive sadness about her—a weighty air appeared to gather around her broad face and her large, expressive, slightly Asian eyes. Not the sadness of a woman treated cruelly or badly, but when she looked at her husband something communicated loss. Emptiness.

When you came into the house you could hear the methodic thump and clack of the loom in the back. His wife would disappear there, then

reappear and maybe give a half smile and ask about your health. You'd have heard no exchange of words in the backroom, but soon the sturdy Russian would materialize. He wore simple brown pants, an ample shirt that fit him loosely. His face was weathered, his beard thick, trimmed, and as white as snow. He would look you in the eye and ask if you wanted a rug. If you said yes, he would disappear and bring back seven or eight rugs and set them carefully before you and say simply, Five dollars. A high price, but the rugs were of wool from the Russian's own sheep and of extremely high quality. They were not dyed and carried the hue of whatever sheep they were taken from, varying from black to snow white. When you paid him, he would not say anything but would simply roll up your rug, tie it up with stiff twine, and hand it to you, then, taking his money, put it in a jar on the mantle. Without a word, he would then return to his loom. It was always the same whether you came early in the morning, in the late afternoon, or after sunset.

-1-

They had been there about two years when Bishop Johansen, noticing that their names were not on the church records, came to introduce himself. He asked if he might spend a few minutes with the man. The Russian came out, sat on the davenport, and motioned to a dining room chair, where the bishop sat. His wife hovered around for a few minutes, then retreated to the back of the house out of sight. The Russian sat stiffly, his feet flat on the floor, hands on his knees, his back and head straight. He stared straight ahead, and although the bishop was right in front of him, it seemed to the visitor as if the Slav were looking into space or behind him.

The bishop cleared his throat and said, Well, you have lived in my ward for some time and I feel sorry that I have not come to introduce myself. I am Bishop Peter Johansen, my wife is called Mary.

The man nodded but said nothing, so the bishop continued, How shall I call you?

The man said without elaboration, Moisey Semyonovich Koltsov.

The bishop laughed and said, Perhaps you could write that down for me?

No, the man answered, I cannot write.

Can your wife?

No.

There was a long silence. The bishop nodded and said, May I call you Brother Koltsov (although he said it “Coalstove”)?

The man nodded.

And your wife is called?

Tatyana Avenirovna Koltsova.

At this, the bishop just nodded. Are you members of the Church?

The man nodded and said, Yes, we are members of the Russian Orthodox Church.

The bishop said, I see.

He squirmed around a bit and then asked, Well, now that you are deep in Mormon country, would you like to learn more about the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints? You and the Kims down the street are the only non-members in the ward boundary. Should I have the ward missionaries come over?

The Russian nodded, Yes.

-2-

Over the course of the year, the Russians were baptized. The ward missionaries taught them with the bishop and his wife in attendance. Brother and Sister Coalstove, as they came to be known, sat quietly. She appeared animated by the lessons and asked many questions. Could she keep her beloved icons? No, we worship the Lord only. Would Mary still watch over her? As much as she ever had. Could she read her Slavic Bible? Of

course. He, however, sat still and quiet. Never asking for so much as a clarification. When they asked if he believed Joseph Smith was a prophet, he said yes. When they were asked if they wanted to be baptized, he said yes in the same voice he said everything. When she said yes, she wept openly and fell into Sister Johansen's arms, visibly shaking.

That night the bishop asked his wife, Do you find him strange?

She said she did but just assumed it was the way of Russian men.

No doubt you are right, he said softly, no doubt you are right.

Over the next two years, the bishop learned to call the stoic Russian a friend. Of sorts. He came to every activity. Helped in every bit of work he was asked to do. He labored at the storehouse or at the stake peach orchard. He did his home teaching. The bishop hired him to help move cattle off of the summer range come late fall. He was an able horseman and cattle hand and did an excellent job moving dogies down. He never smiled or complained. He went about his work dispassionately, but efficiently. There was never a wasted movement. He'd answer any question put to him, but never ask anything in return. Where did you live in Russia? Saransk. What did you do there? Same as here, I was a weaver of rugs. Why did you come here? To escape Stalin. Out on the trail around the campfire, the bishop asked once for him to sing a song from the Fatherland. In a deep voice, he sang a strange and haunting song. No one understood the words, of course, but it was filled with power and longing—it was the closest the bishop had ever seen him come to expressing some emotion. The only thing he would not do was offer a prayer. If called on to do so at church he would walk to the front, fold his arms, bow his head, and then his mouth would begin to move, but nothing would come out. Eventually, he'd sit back down as if nothing had happened.

Like her husband's friendship with the Russian, Sister Johansen became Sister Coalstove's bosom buddy. They spent much time together—canning, planting their gardens, and planning activities with the Relief Society. But despite their closeness, Sister Johansen had a sense

that Sister Coalstove was holding something of herself back. A secret sorrow she would not share, even though they shared many secrets, including something a little strange about Brother Coalstove that made her blush. It was Christmas Eve night she confided the secret with her husband the bishop.

-3-

The Johansens were sitting in the front room drinking a cup of coffee, their once a year indulgence—despite the new emphasis from Church headquarters in Salt Lake on living the Word of Wisdom, they figured that once a year would do them no harm. Sister Johansen was in a pensive mood and looked a little sad.

My dear, the bishop asked, is anything the matter?

She looked up and sighed, I was just thinking how lovely this old house would be at Christmas time if we had some children about. She took a drink of coffee and smiled at the husband, Don't worry, I'm not going back to my old angry self, it's just sometimes I wish the Lord had seen fit. . . .

She stared back at the fire and was silent. The bishop just nodded. He knew enough not to open old wounds.

The wind was starting to pick up and a lonely howl sounded as a gust made the old house give a low moan.

The Coalstoves are the same, you know, she ventured further.

Her husband grunted and said, That's not our business.

She laughed. Well, maybe we should make it so, or at least you should. She was giving him an I-know-something-you-don't look.

Why is that? he said.

Well, she smiled, leaning closer to him and putting her mug on the side table, It's because he never, well . . . well, he never plays the part of a man in their bed.

Never? asked the bishop, a little surprised.

Never.

Well, come first Sunday after the New Year, he would get to the bottom of this.

-4-

Sister Johansen knew something was wrong the moment her husband stepped out of the bitter cold January night. He had walked home from the chapel, leaving their Mercury as if he had not driven, as he sometimes did in the summer. He plopped on the couch and just stared. She brought him a cup of hot chocolate and a homemade peanut butter cookie. But when she came in a while later both were sitting cold on the table.

What is it? she said.

He looked up, his face one of confusion and terror. There is more in this world than I ever understood. But I believe him. By hell, I believe him. I had to ask every question leading him by the hand. Even so, he told me all. And I believe every word.

Sister Johansen could get nothing from him about what he had learned. He stammered as he tried to explain, It is my priesthood duty as bishop not to break trust with those who counsel with me. . . . And here he paused. But I cannot bear what has been placed on me.

She looked at her husband a long time. I'm going to ask Sister Coalstove.

Not now, he said.

Now, she said.

She did not come home that night. He understood why. She appeared before breakfast and went to work making him pancakes and scrambled eggs and bacon. When he walked in, she abandoned the stove and threw her arms around him. They held each other a long time. So long everything was burnt. It did not matter. She waved a towel around to drive the smoke away, then iron skillet were placed out in the snow

on the back porch to cool. They went to the diner. To eat. To talk. And to make a plan.

-5-

This was the Russian and his wife's story put together in a single telling.



No two people could ever have been happier. She was the daughter of the mayor and he a master weaver and head of the weaver's guild—a powerful position in that Soviet town devoted largely to textiles and wool. He was older than she, but it did not seem to matter. They both loved to dance, to sing, and to go for long sleigh rides together through the forests near their village. She was religious, and although it was discouraged, she remained faithful, as did her father. But one night her papa was arrested and accused of falsifying his reports to the Party. It was a lie. Moisey spoke on his behalf, but his father-in-law was convicted of treason against the state and sentenced to ten years of hard labor in the gulags of Siberia.

Because he had stood as a witness for his father-in-law, Moisey now fell under suspicion. He knew what was coming, so he and Tatyana fled. He had a distant cousin in Leningrad to whom he thought he could appeal for help in escaping to Finland and from there to Sweden and then on to the United States or Australia. It was a long and complicated journey, for they had no traveling papers, and so they could not simply hop a train, or even stay in a hotel. By relying on the kindness of strangers and networks of sympathizers, they made their way to the fabled city. They found the cousin, who welcomed them with open arms. Then betrayed them to the authorities.

They were arrested and taken to a holding cell where in the morning they would be tried and sent to prison or executed.

All through the night, in that cold underground stone building, Moisey watched his wife pray and listened to her weep. He knew that life for them was over. He was sure he would be executed. She would be imprisoned. He knew the indignities she would endure. She was young. She would be abused often. She would grow old in prison until consumption took her, or dysentery, or some other foul disease. He knew how enemies of the state were treated. She would die toothless. Broken. Mad. Deserted. Forsaken. And alone.

Alone.

He stood up and walked to a corner where a window high up opened on a moonless summer night. He raised his hands in the air and said, Satan. If you exist. If you get my wife and me out and to the United States, I will offer up my soul.

Later that night a guard appeared and said he was with an underground group. He hurried them from the building and onto a fishing boat that sailed them to Stockholm. With help from a group getting people out of Stalin's USSR, they made their way to New York by cargo ship. Upon his arrival in the United States, when Moisey stepped into the street connected to the pier, he disappeared. Or his soul did. There was only this puppet left behind that would say what he would have said. Did what he would have done. But feels nothing. Thinks nothing. The lights were on, but no one was home.

-6-

The bishop took up the matter with the stake president, who consulted with one of the apostles. They all agreed that such soul-selling was impossible. Besides, because he was baptized, he was free of any deals with Satan.

He explained it all to his Russian friend, who sat still, staring ahead as he often did. His wife was beside him weeping hopefully.

Do you understand? the bishop asked.

He nodded but said nothing.

The devil does not have your soul! the bishop nearly shouted at him.

The Russian stared at him then said, Nevertheless, it is now with Satan. May I return to my weaving, Bishop?

Over the course of the next few months, the bishop, despite what his line-leaders had told him, became convinced that the Russian was right. Something was wrong with him. And that his soul disappeared could be as likely as anything to explain it. He talked long to his wife. They began to look for books that would explain the matter, traveling as far as the University of Utah library to search for strange texts of medieval magic that would leave them scared and shaking in the darkness of the night. More and more often, the bishop felt as though their house were under attack from the evil one. The use of the priesthood became common in dismissing the demonic influences.

Spring came, and it was time to move the herd back to the summer range high up Battle Creek Canyon. The Russian was down with the flu and did not assist. One night, the bishop fell into conversation with one of the Lamanite brothers he had hired to help. He was an able hand and a hard worker, but not inclined to talk much. However, one night the conversation turned to the mysteries. The Indian said his grandfather was a shaman who sojourned in the spirit world. As the bishop listened to his tale, he began to wonder if there might be something to this belief. Perhaps the Ute's grandfather could help him recapture the Russian's soul.

-7-

A series of letters and one long and very expensive phone call saw it all arranged. The bishop drove to Towaoc, Colorado on the Ute reservation to rescue his friend's soul. Before leaving, he told his wife his plan. She was aghast. She pled with him not to do it. Could an Indian shaman do something that the Mormon priesthood could not? But his mind was made up. He didn't know what else to try. He had prayed and fasted

much about the problem and nothing had come to him. He was willing to try anything at this point. So in the end, his wife cooked up some fried chicken and potato salad to send with him. She was crying as he climbed into their station wagon and pulled out.

He stopped for the night in Blanding. The shaman had instructed him that he should fast, but he would not have been able to get anything down anyway. He did not understand what was coming, but he was frightened. Things were not as simple as he once thought, and he wondered what unexpected things awaited. That night he was unable to sleep; however, as the dawn leaked into his cheap hotel room, he could not help but smile. If someone had told him seven years ago when he was called as bishop that his duties would require a spirit journey with a Lamanite shaman to rescue a Russian's soul from Satan, he would have laughed them to scorn. And yet here he was. And it was about to happen.



The shaman lived in a cabin outside of town. It was a beautiful place near Four Corners with grand mesas and the southern end of the Rockies rising in the distance. The sight brought him some comfort. He had always thought of himself as a man of the mountains, and their presence reassured him and strengthened his courage.

The old Indian welcomed him, but offered few words. He took his payment, then offered him a chair. He explained that they would enter the spirit world at night by the light of a fir log and asked for the guide item. The bishop pulled out the white baptismal garment that Tatyana had given him. It was the clothes that the Russian had been christened in as a baby. He handed it to the shaman. The Ute closed his eyes, then ran his hands over the old white ceremonial dress for some time as if he were trying to find something hidden in its threads. At last, he opened his old, red, and jaundiced eyes and said, This will do.

They ate a silent meal together of pork and beans then retired to the backyard. Old blankets were spread around a fire pit in which the shaman kindled a blaze with a bottle of kerosene and a Zippo lighter. It was dark now and the old man sat on one of the blankets and motioned for the bishop to sit next to him. He began a chant, a haunting, other-worldly song, and although he could not understand the Ute's words, the bishop felt their power. When the chant was over, they sat quietly until the Lamanite asked if he were ready.

As ready as I'll ever be, said the bishop.

-8-

The old man took a long pipe made of carved wood with a clay bowl. He took a dried button of peyote and pulled it apart into the pipe and held the lighter up to it, and with short, quick puffs pulled the flame into the bowl. It began to smoke, filling the air with a sweet, pungent, earthy smell. Soon enough, the bowl's contents were glowing heartily. The shaman inhaled the smoke, held it, then released it into the air. He gave the pipe to Bishop Johansen. He tried to follow the shaman's example but coughed violently. It took a few minutes to regain his breath. The shaman handed the bishop a pint of whiskey, and he took a small medicinal swallow. For a moment, it made things worse, but then it helped soothe what the smoke had irritated. He tried again. It took a bit to get to the point where he could hold the smoke in, but with every attempt he made progress. The old Ute was very patient with his fumbling attempts to learn to smoke. Something the bishop had never done.

The moon was starting to rise. It looked like a living thing, as if it were an angel or a powerful spirit. Odd, he thought, that I have never noticed that.

He found himself standing on a vast waste. The mountains had disappeared and the empty plain extended far into the distance no matter which direction he looked. The shaman was standing beside him,

handed him back the Russian's baptismal clothes, and said, We have a long way to go. We will change forms many times, but do not release this, for it is our link to the man's spirit you seek.

Suddenly, the Lamanite was a raven. He squatted, gave a loud cry, and then sprang into the air. Bishop Johansen was also a raven. The clothes of the Russian had shrunk to the size of a soda cracker. He seized them in his beak and noticed that the taste was like no flavor known to him. As he looked through his corvid eyes, he realized that while the color was monochrome, it was not black, gray, and white, but a new color he had never seen before. A color for which he had no word in his vocabulary.

Looking up, he saw the shaman-raven pulling away, so he leaped into the air, following the other bird winging its way across the plain. He found flying natural, as if he had done it all his life. He could not help but feel buoyant and hopeful. Brave and swift. He was a new creature with powers untapped. He gave a caw of triumph through his beak clenched tight on the Russian's clothes. He would succeed!

They journeyed long. After flying for a while as ravens, they next were salmon, then bears, then agile coyotes. With each incarnation, the bishop felt more alive and attuned to the spirit world around him. He remembered scenes from childhood that he had not remembered for years. He felt as though his life had a purpose and meaning from the beginning, perhaps for this very thing. He wept because he had never done anything more worthwhile in his life. He felt he finally understood why his Heavenly Father did the things he did. He cried for joy.

As he ran as a wolf across a Russian forest, he knew they were near. The end of the quest was at hand. He could taste it on the baptismal clothes he held in his mouth.

And suddenly there was Moisey. Or rather there was his spirit, squatting over a child of ten or eleven. Behind him was a demon. The bishop knew it immediately. The demon's color was unearthly and its demeanor, while human, was distorted and cruel. The wicked spirit's fingers were long and the apparition had a wretched appearance of something grave-

like and wasted. It laughed as it pointed to the child, cursing it in such language that the bishop could scarcely listen. He understood the words perfectly, although it was not English or any language he recognized. The bishop turned to the shaman, who stood beside him. Both of them had returned to their human form. He asked, What do we do?

The Ute looked at the scene for a long time. The evil spirit was apparently trying to coerce the Russian into tempting the child to push a little girl down into the muddy street. But the Russian just stood there, looking at the ground. The bishop had seen many men sad and in despair. He had seen sorrow and defeat. He had viewed men wretched in countenance for a wasted life of misdeeds. But until that moment he had never comprehended the anguish of hell reflected so vividly as in the face of the Russian. He remembered the words of Alma in the Book of Mormon: *And now, for three days and for three nights was I racked, even with the pains of a damned soul. And it came to pass that as I was thus racked with torment, while I was harrowed up by the memory of my many sins . . .*

He had read and preached that scripture many times to repentant souls, but its meaning now struck him with the force of a sledgehammer. He found himself weeping, but his teeth were clenched in rage. His companion placed his arm around his shoulder.

The shaman spoke to the bishop in a whisper. I will reveal the chain. This you must break. It will weaken me and I will have to depart. I will seek help. Whatever magic or power you possess, you must use it, else his fate will be yours. Savvy?

The bishop looked at the scene before him and nodded. Aye, I understand.

The Indian stepped forward. The demon and the Russian turned as if suddenly aware they were there. The Indian reached into a small leather bag tied to his belt and from it, he withdrew a purple powder and blew it at the figure. As he did so, the demon screamed in rage and

moved as if to attack the old Ute, but the bishop's guide had become an eagle and flew quickly into the air, into which he vanished.

-9-

Revealed now to view was a long, golden thread that ran from the hand of the demon to a silver collar circling the neck of the Russian's spirit. The bishop raised his hand to the square. The Indian had told him to use what power he had and he knew what that meant. In the name of the Savior Christ, he rebuked the demon. The demon did not move, but stood to eye the bishop. Its eyes narrowed and through its teeth it spat at the bishop, You lack faith, little man. You've bitten off more than you can chew.

The bishop felt his fear rising as the infernal imp began to laugh. Suddenly it cried out, Master, someone is trying to take what is yours! Come. Battle. We have been besieged!

It grew dark, but not from the sun going down. Instead, a mist gathered—a fog that oppressed and dampened all the light within him. He could not speak. And out of the darkness came the very embodiment of emptiness and hate, a spirit of such power and malevolence that he staggered and fell to the ground. Well-named was that monster Lucifer, Son of the Morning, for his power was great. The monster spirit looked at him and said, Bishop Johansen. You, I know well. But bound you will be like this man. . . .

He did not finish his sentence, for into the space came two bright spirits. Angry and full of uncanny power they were. One flew at Satan. Bishop Johansen recognized his wife, Mary. With her was Tatyana, who ran to her husband's spirit and tore the binding from his neck like it was paper. Mary became a lark, then a bear, then a wolverine that moved raging over the devil's form like a wheel of fire. The monster tried to fight her but she was too swift. Too bright. Too full of light. His darkness melted before the onslaught. The bishop's tongue was loosed. His fear

was gone. His wife's power infused him with a mighty faith. As he grew, the evil one shrank. And now as he invoked the priesthood, he drew upon ancient wells of potent force that went as deep as the fundamental particles that made him.

When he was done, the devil was gone and the five of them stood together in joy. The bishop shouted just in case Satan was lurking in the shadows, I reclaim this man, Moisey Semyonovich Koltsov, by the power of the Lamb. He has been baptized and is clean! He is no longer yours! He is God's! Back to Hell with you.

-10-

The bishop woke up. It was late morning. He lay on the blanket by the shaman's fire. His head hurt terribly and he stood up only to vomit. He remembered everything. The shaman came out of his cottage and handed the bishop a cup of coffee. Despite it not being Christmas Eve, he drank.

They were silent for a long time. Finally, he asked, How did my wife get there?

The Indian waited a long time before answering and finally said, I told them what was happening in their dreams.

The bishop thought about it and then said, But how did they find us?

The Indian nodded, Love can do things in the spirit world. It cuts through many mazes.

The bishop was silent a while, then asked, Why did they have power that I did not?

The old Lamanite shrugged and said, You were afraid. They were not.

When the bishop returned home, his wife ran out to meet him and for a long time they held each other. After a space of time, Mary called Tatyana and told her that the bishop had returned. The squeal of car tires announced that the Coalstoves had arrived. The Russian ran from the car and grabbed the bishop and swung him around and around, crying, laughing, and singing violently and loudly in Russian and English.

- 11 -

It was said in Pleasant Grove that the change in the Russian transformed the city. His love for life was infectious. He and his wife and their five children were a common feature of any good thing that happened in the city. And it was noted by all that their blessed children had two sets of parents, for the bishop and his wife treated them as their own. Never was there a happier pair of friends in all the history of Pleasant Grove. It was said by many that no two couples feared the devil less, or were more feared by the same, for they were always doing good and in their presence no evil could abide.