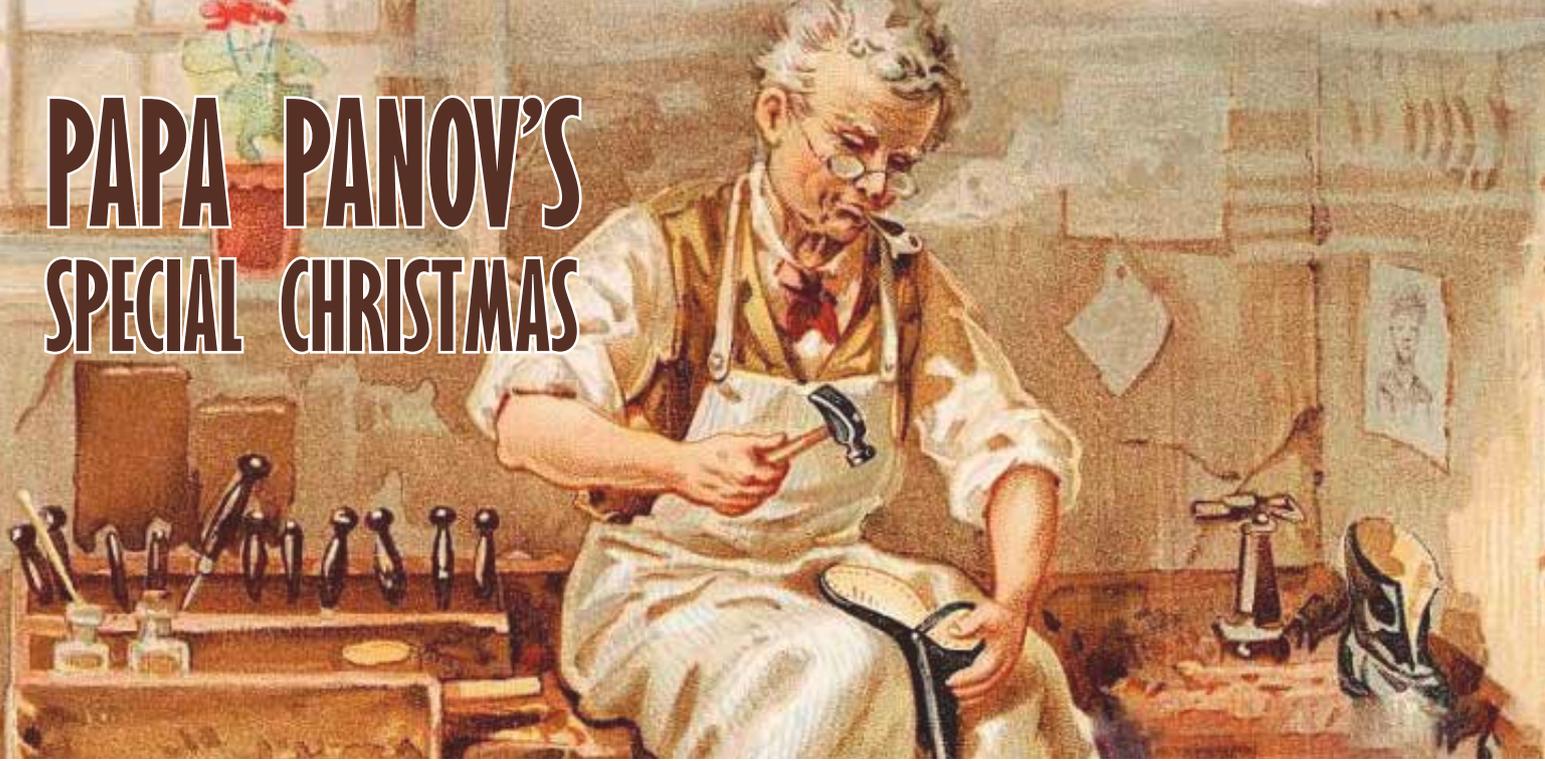


PAPA PANOV'S SPECIAL CHRISTMAS



A classic folk tale adapted by Leo Tolstoy

It was Christmas Eve and although it was still afternoon, lights had begun to appear in the shops and houses of the little Russian village, for the short winter day was nearly over. Excited children scurried indoors and only muffled sounds of chatter and laughter escaped from closed shutters.

Old Papa Panov, the village shoemaker, stepped outside his shop to take one last look around. The sounds of happiness, the bright lights and the faint, but delicious smells of Christmas cooking reminded him of past Christmases when his wife had still been alive and his own children were young. Now they had gone. His usually cheerful face, with the little laughter wrinkles behind the round steel spectacles, now looked sad. He stepped back into his shop, closed the shutters, and set a pot of coffee to heat on the stove. Then with a sigh, he settled into his big armchair.

Papa Panov did not often read, but tonight he pulled down the big old family Bible. He turned the pages to The Birth of Jesus and slowly began tracing the lines with one forefinger. He read how Mary and Joseph, tired by their journey to Bethlehem, found no room for them at the inn, so that Mary's little baby was born in a stable.

"Oh, dear!" exclaimed Papa Panov. "If only they had come here! I would have given them my bed and I could have covered the baby with my patchwork quilt to keep him warm."

He read on about the wise men who had come to see the baby Jesus, bringing him splendid gifts. Papa Panov's face fell. "I have no gift that I could give him," he thought sadly.

Then his face brightened. He put down the Bible, got up and stretched his arms to the shelf high up in his little room. He took down a small, dusty box and opened it. Inside was a perfect pair of tiny leather shoes. Papa Panov smiled with satisfaction. Yes, they were as good as he had remembered – the best shoes he had ever made.

"I should give him those," he decided, as he gently put them away and sat down again.

He was feeling tired and the further he read the sleepier he became. The print began to dance before his eyes so that he closed them just for a minute. In no time, Papa Panov was fast asleep. He dreamed that someone was in his room and he knew at once, as one does in dreams, who the person was. It was Jesus.

"You have been wishing that you could see me, Papa Panov," Jesus said kindly. "Then look for me tomorrow. It will be Christmas Day and I will visit you. But look carefully, for I shall not tell you who I am."

When Papa Panov awoke the bells were ringing out and a thin light was filtering through the shutters.

"Bless my soul!" said Papa Panov. "It's Christmas Day!"

He stood up and stretched. Then his face filled with happiness as he remembered his dream. This would be a very special Christmas after all, for Jesus was coming to visit him. How would he look? Would he be a little baby as at that first Christmas? Would he be a grown man, a carpenter, or the great King that he is as God's Son? Papa Panov thought to himself that he must watch carefully the whole day so that he would recognise him however he came.

Papa Panov put on a special pot of coffee for his Christmas breakfast, opened the shutters, and looked out of the window. The street was deserted; no one was stirring yet, no one except the road sweeper. The man looked as miserable and dirty as ever and well he might! Whoever wanted to work on Christmas Day? And in the raw cold and bitter freezing mist of such a morning?

Papa Panov opened the shop door, letting in a thin stream of cold air.

"Come in!" he shouted across the street cheerily. "Come in and have some hot coffee to keep out the cold!"

The sweeper looked up, scarcely able to believe his ears. He was only too glad to put down his broom and come into the warm room. His old clothes steamed gently in the heat of the stove and he clasped both red hands round the comforting warm mug as he drank.

Papa Panov watched him with satisfaction, but every now and then his eyes strayed to the window. It would never do to miss his special visitor.

"Expecting someone?" the sweeper asked at last. So Papa Panov told him about his dream.

"Well, I hope he comes," said the sweeper. "You've given me a bit of Christmas cheer I never expected to have. I'd say you deserve to have your dream come true." The sweeper then smiled.

When he had gone, Papa Panov put on cabbage soup for his dinner and went to the door again, scanning the street. He saw no one. But he was mistaken. Someone was coming.

The girl walked so slowly and quietly. It was a while before Papa Panov noticed her. The girl looked very tired and she was carrying something. As she drew nearer he could see that it was a baby wrapped in a thin shawl. There was such sadness in her face. In the pinched little face of the baby, Papa Panov's heart went out to them.

"Won't you come in," he called, stepping outside to meet them. "You both need to warm by the fire and rest."

The young mother let him shepherd her indoors and to the comfort of the armchair. She gave a big sigh of relief.

"I'll warm some milk for the baby," Papa Panov said. "I've had children of my own. I can feed her for you."

He took the milk from the stove and carefully fed the baby from a spoon, warming her tiny feet by the stove at the same time.

"She needs shoes," the cobbler said.

But the girl replied, "I cannot afford shoes. I have no husband to bring home money. I'm on my way to the next village to get work."

A sudden thought flashed through Papa Panov's mind. He remembered the little shoes he had looked at last night. But he had been keeping those for Jesus. He looked again at the cold little feet and made up his mind.

"Try these on her," he said, handing the baby and the shoes to the mother. The beautiful little shoes were a perfect fit. The girl smiled happily and the baby gurgled with pleasure.

"You have been so kind to us," the girl said. She then stood up with her baby and said, "May all your Christmas wishes come true!"

But Papa Panov was beginning to wonder if his very special Christmas wish would come true. Perhaps he had missed his visitor?

He looked anxiously up and down the street. There were plenty of people about but they were all faces that he recognised. There were neighbours going to call on their families. They nodded and smiled and wished him Happy Christmas. There were beggars and Papa Panov hurried inside to fetch them hot soup and a generous hunk of bread. He hurried out again so he wouldn't miss the "Important Stranger".

All too soon the winter dusk fell. When Papa Panov next went to the door and strained his eyes, he could no longer make out the passers-by. Most were home by now. He walked slowly back into his room, closed the shutters, and sat down wearily in his armchair.

"So it had been just a dream after all", he thought to himself. "Jesus had not come."

Then all at once, he knew that he was no longer alone in the room. This was not a dream for he was wide awake.

Suddenly, he saw a long stream of people coming towards him. He then recognised the road sweeper, the young mother and her baby, and the beggars he had fed.

As they passed by him, each whispered, "Didn't you see me, Papa Panov?"

Bewildered, he called out to each of them, "Who are you?"

Then another voice answered him. It was the voice from his dream – the voice of Jesus.

"I was hungry and you fed me," Jesus said. "I was naked and you clothed me. I was cold and you warmed me. I came to you today in every one of those you helped and welcomed."

Then all was quiet and still. Only the sound of the clock ticking could be heard. A great peace and happiness seemed to fill the room, overflowing Papa Panov's heart until he wanted to burst out singing and laughing and dancing with joy.

Papa Panov smiled and said, "So he did come after all."

LEO TOLSTOY

