

How This Book Came About

Believe it or not, telling a hunting story so that everyone believes you and nobody starts wondering if you haven't made half of it up, is even harder than catching a bear singlehanded. And the most amazing thing is that whenever someone tells a story about how, as a child, he tumbled out of a ninth-floor window and jumped up at once without even a scratch to show for it, everyone believes him, whereas if an angler describes how he caught a seven-foot pike, he's cried down and gets himself a bad name everywhere.

But what I say goes, of course. Everyone knows Uncle Trivim, and the stories I tell are one hundred per cent true and one hundred per cent make-believe.

One day I suddenly had the brilliant idea of writing down in a notebook all the adventures I'd had on woodland paths, rivers and lakes. So I sat myself down on the porch and set to thinking about where to begin.

Well, how about like this...

A CHAPTER ON HOW, THANKS TO A SMALL ACCIDENT, I FOUND A BIG MUSHROOM AND BECAME VERY FAMOUS

Long, long ago I remember sitting on a log in the middle of the yard, chopping **L**and sawing and bang-banging away with my hammer, knocking something together.

"Trivim!" my wife called to me from inside. "Come and have lunch!"

But by this time I'd got so carried away, I didn't feel at all like food. Instead, I felt I'd better hammer in a few more nails here and there. And so I started examining it from this way and that and then my wife came up and said with a sigh, "Oh, dearie me, Trivim, I see you've made a little barrel."

I looked at it more carefully and blow me down if it wasn't a little barrel! I put it on its side, and it rolled beautifully and then I stood it on one end and it stood firm.

But then my wife suddenly looked sad and, I remember, got upset with me for the very first time.

"Everybody else's husband goes mushroom-picking along the Volga," she said, "and catches all sorts of fish but I reckon I'm going to die without ever trying anything of the sort."

And it was true — now we had a barrel but somehow no salted mushrooms to go in it. It was a crying shame, it really was!

"Right," I said, "now don't you fret, my dear. Soon you'll not only be nibbling lovely mushrooms but cooking scrumptious fish soup as well."

As soon as I'd said that, I didn't half feel scared. What on earth had got into me!

Why, I'd never picked a mushroom in my life and I hadn't a clue how to tell one sort from another.

After racking my brains for a long time, I decided to visit the library where I was given a huge mountain of books — both in Russian and my native Chuvash — on how to salt and marinate mushrooms, where to find them and how to tell them apart. I picked out one with illustrations and detailed information, shut myself in a room and spent the whole night reading it through and memorizing everything, and as soon as the sun came up I took my basket with shoulder straps, tucked the book inside my coat and off I set.

It had turned into a pleasant, mild morning. When you went down into a hollow, you sunk into a mist and when you climbed a rise, you felt the warmth of the sun and saw little beads of dew glistening in the grass. And I only had time to smoke three pipes and sing one song before I reached the Volga. I whittled a stick from a strong pine branch and set off towards the village of Kuvshinka where the forests are thicker. And so I walked along, tapping the ground with my stick, and the sun beat down hotter and hotter. I stopped by Lake Astrakhanka and decided to wash my hands clean of pine resin. I'd only just scooped up a handful of water when all of a sudden I spotted a bamboo cane sticking out of the water, just like a submarine's periscope, and charging straight at me. Why, it was splashing up as much water as a motorboat! I sat down in surprise, completely flabbergasted. Maybe I was seeing things? I shut my eyes, counted to three, added up how many floor boards we had in the house and how many stakes there were in our fence, opened them again and this time saw the cane racing across towards the other bank. All of a sudden I heard someone shout: "Uncle Trivim! Get it, get it! The fish's nabbed my rod!"

I looked round and saw a boy jumping up and down by the weir, flapping his arms and sobbing loudly. So I threw my clothes off in a trice and plunged in. It was freezing! Tough as I am, it still took my breath away. I shot off like a cork out of a bottle, taking a good deep breath first, and tried to catch the fish up. We — the fish and I — kicked up such a storm that the water was covered all over with frothy foam like whipped cream. I felt my strength ebbing and I could see the fish was also now moving in fits and starts. Right, I said to myself, I'm going to get you now. I turned over onto my back for a rest and the fish stopped about twelve yards away. Then I started quietly edging closer and closer to it and suddenly dived down and grabbed hold of the rod. It certainly showed me what it was made of! It zoomed down to the bottom so fast I nearly let go, and if I hadn't managed to clutch onto a willow branch, it would have dragged me under too.

Straining myself to the utmost, I pulled the rod up and the pike went soaring through the air in a silver arc and flopped down onto the ground. Now I may be tall but it turned out to be even longer. I helped the boy hoist it onto his shoulder and it hung down on either side like a yoke, its head and tail trailing along the ground.

Then I sent the boy home and set off myself into the forest.



We Chuvash have a saying: "Trip up in the morning, and you'll trip up all day long." Now I know that if I'm lucky in the morning, I'll be lucky all day long.

As soon as I reached the first trees, I started lifting the heavy fir branches off the ground with my stick and prodding among the bushes. Light as feathers, the fallen leaves swirled in all directions when I swung my arm right round and slashed through them. The racket I was making echoed all through the forest but I still did not come across a single mushroom. I stopped, took my cap off, ran my palm