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Tales of Kindness, Fate, and Magic (Russian Folklore Retold)

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Аннотация

This collection presents retellings of Russian folktales in which ordinary characters face trials of fate, encounter the supernatural, and make moral choices. Kindness, patience, and honesty are rewarded, while pride and cruelty lead to downfall. Supernatural forces act as tests of human character, reflecting the folk understanding of justice and morality in a symbolic and narrative form.

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Introduction

Russian folktales form a rich and diverse tradition in which everyday life, moral testing, and elements of the supernatural are closely intertwined. These stories often begin in familiar rural settings—villages, peasant households, forests—and gradually expand into a world where animals speak, spirits intervene in human affairs, and ordinary people encounter forces beyond their understanding.

Despite their fantastical elements, these tales are grounded in clear ethical ideas. Kindness is rewarded, cruelty is punished, patience is tested, and cleverness often triumphs over strength or wealth. Heroes are frequently simple peasants, youngest children, or underestimated figures who prove their worth not through status, but through behavior and moral choices.

Figures such as Baba Yaga, Father Frost, or magical animals appear not merely as fantasy characters, but as symbolic forces that test human character. Similarly, themes like injustice within families, the struggle against poverty, or the consequences of

pride reflect real social tensions in a stylized form.

The following retellings preserve the narrative structure of traditional Russian folk stories while presenting them in expanded literary form. Together, they illustrate a worldview in which fate is flexible, morality is active, and even the most ordinary person can change their destiny through courage, kindness, or wisdom.

* * *

The Tsarevna Frog

Long ago, in a distant kingdom, there lived a mighty tsar who ruled over a vast land. He had three sons, all of whom had reached the age when they should marry. Wishing to determine their brides according to fate rather than personal preference, the tsar summoned them and gave each a bow and an arrow.

“My sons,” he said, “ride into the open field and shoot your arrows. Wherever an arrow lands, there you shall find the maiden destined to become your wife.”

The brothers obeyed. They rode to a wide meadow, drew their bows, and released their arrows into the sky.

The eldest brother's arrow flew far and landed in the courtyard of a nobleman's estate. There a young noblewoman found it and returned it with a smile. The second brother's arrow landed near the home of a wealthy merchant, whose daughter picked it up. Both brothers were pleased with their fate.

But Ivan Tsarevich, the youngest son, watched his arrow soar high into the air and disappear in the distance. He searched for

it through fields and forests until at last he came to a marshy swamp. There, sitting upon a green hummock among the reeds, was a large frog holding his arrow in its mouth.

Ivan could hardly believe his eyes.

“Give me my arrow,” he said.

The frog replied, “You may take it, Ivan Tsarevich, but first you must marry me.”

The prince was horrified. How could a frog become his wife? Yet he remembered his father's command. Fate had chosen this creature, and he dared not disobey. Sadly he returned to the palace with the frog and soon the strange wedding was held.

The elder brothers and their wives laughed behind Ivan's back. The servants whispered throughout the palace. Ivan himself felt ashamed and avoided speaking about his unusual bride. Yet the frog never complained. She spoke kindly to him and seemed wiser than anyone expected.

Some time later the tsar decided to test his daughters-in-law.

“I wish to see which of you is the most skilled,” he announced. “Tomorrow each wife must bake a loaf of bread for me.”

The elder brothers were delighted, for their wives had been taught many household arts. Ivan, however, returned home sorrowful.

“How can a frog bake bread?” he wondered aloud.

The frog looked at him calmly.

“Do not worry, my prince,” she said. “Go to sleep. The morning is wiser than the evening.”

Though still troubled, Ivan obeyed.

When darkness fell and Ivan slept, the frog slipped out of her skin and became a beautiful maiden. She was Vassilissa the Wise, whose beauty shone like the moon and whose wisdom surpassed that of all others. She summoned magical servants and commanded them to prepare a loaf worthy of a tsar.

Before dawn the work was complete. The bread was magnificent, decorated with delicate patterns, towers, and symbols of the kingdom.

The next morning Ivan awoke and could scarcely believe what he saw.

When the loaves were presented to the tsar, the difference was obvious. The bread baked by the elder wives was ordinary, though respectable. But Vassilissa's loaf was so splendid that the tsar declared it worthy of being served on great feast days.

The elder brothers were astonished, while Ivan felt both relief and pride.

Soon the tsar announced another challenge.

“Now let each wife weave a carpet for my hall.”

Again Ivan became anxious. Again the frog comforted him and told him to sleep.

That night Vassilissa shed her frog skin and summoned her magical helpers. They wove a carpet unlike any ever seen in the kingdom. It displayed cities, forests, rivers, mountains, and stars, all worked in shining threads.

When the carpets were brought before the tsar, the works

of the elder wives seemed plain by comparison. Vassilissa's carpet amazed everyone. The tsar praised it as a masterpiece and ordered it displayed in his finest chamber.

The brothers grew jealous. They could not understand how a frog could accomplish such wonders.

At last the tsar declared that a great feast would be held and all the daughters-in-law must attend.

The elder brothers laughed at Ivan.

"How will your frog come to the feast?" they mocked. "Will she hop through the palace gates?"

Ivan returned home embarrassed.

But the frog merely smiled.

"Go ahead without me," she said. "When you hear a rumbling and a knocking, do not be frightened. Simply say that your wife has arrived."

The feast began. Noble guests filled the hall. Music played, and tables groaned beneath rich foods and sparkling drinks.

Suddenly a great noise was heard outside. The walls seemed to tremble.

The guests looked around in alarm.

But Ivan remembered the frog's words.

"Do not fear," he announced. "It is only my wife arriving."

Moments later a magnificent golden carriage drawn by splendid horses rolled into the courtyard. From it stepped a woman of extraordinary beauty. She was Vassilissa the Wise.

The entire hall fell silent.

The tsar himself rose to greet her. No one could take their eyes off her grace and elegance. The elder brothers' wives, who had once mocked Ivan, felt ashamed beside her.

During the feast Vassilissa drank wine but secretly poured it into one sleeve. When served roasted swan, she hid the bones in the other sleeve.

The guests wondered at these strange actions.

Then music began, and Vassilissa stepped onto the floor to dance.

As she danced, she waved one sleeve. Instantly a crystal-clear lake appeared in the middle of the hall. She waved the other sleeve, and white swans glided across the water.

The sight was so beautiful that everyone gasped in amazement.

The elder wives decided to imitate her. They too poured wine into their sleeves and hid bones during the meal.

When they danced, however, disaster followed. Wine splashed over the guests and the floor. Swan bones flew through the air, striking people and even landing near the tsar himself.

The tsar grew angry and ordered them to stop.

Meanwhile Ivan was overwhelmed with happiness. At last he understood that his wife was no ordinary frog.

That evening, after Vassilissa had left her frog skin behind, Ivan found it hidden away. Believing he could free her forever from the enchantment, he threw the skin into the fire and watched it burn to ashes.

When Vassilissa returned and discovered what had happened,

her face filled with sorrow.

“Oh, Ivan Tsarevich,” she said. “Why did you not wait? Had you endured a little longer, the spell would have ended on its own. Now, because of your impatience, I must leave you.”

Before Ivan could stop her, she transformed into a white swan.

“You will find me in the realm of Koschei the Deathless,” she called.

Then she flew away into the distant sky.

Ivan was heartbroken. He wandered for many days, unable to rest. Finally he resolved to search for Vassilissa no matter how far he must travel.

His journey led him through forests, mountains, and wildernesses. Along the way he encountered many creatures in need.

He met a bear and prepared to hunt it, but the bear begged for mercy. Ivan spared it.

Later he saw a duck and lowered his bow, choosing not to kill it.

He encountered a hare and allowed it to escape.

He also rescued a fish stranded on the shore and returned it safely to the water.

All the animals thanked him and promised to remember his kindness.

After a long journey Ivan reached the hut of Baba Yaga, the mysterious old witch who knew many secrets.

When she heard his story, she took pity on him.

“You seek Vassilissa and wish to defeat Koschei,” she said. “Listen carefully. Koschei's death is hidden within a needle. The needle is inside an egg, the egg inside a duck, the duck inside a hare, and the hare inside a chest buried beneath a mighty oak tree.”

Ivan thanked her and continued his quest.

Eventually he found the ancient oak. Hidden beneath it was the chest. But as soon as it was opened, a hare sprang out and raced away.

At once the hare whose life Ivan had spared appeared and caught the fleeing animal.

From the captured hare burst a duck, which flew toward the sea.

The duck Ivan had spared chased after it and brought it down. The egg fell into the water.

At that moment the fish Ivan had rescued emerged from the depths and returned the egg to him.

Even the bear came and helped uproot the great oak when strength was needed.

Thus every creature repaid the kindness Ivan had once shown.

Holding the egg in his hands, Ivan broke it open and seized the needle hidden within.

Far away, Koschei felt terror for the first time.

Ivan snapped the needle. At that very moment Koschei the Deathless lost his power and perished.

The evil spell over Vassilissa was broken.

Ivan found her and embraced her with great joy. Together they returned to his father's kingdom, where they were welcomed with celebration and happiness.

From that day forward Ivan Tsarevich and Vassilissa the Wise lived in peace. Having endured hardship, learned patience, and proved the value of kindness, they never again allowed pride or haste to guide their actions.

And so they lived happily ever after.

* * *

The Seven Simeons

Long ago there ruled a mighty sovereign known as Tsar Archidei. His treasury overflowed with gold and silver, his granaries were full, and his armies were feared throughout neighboring lands. Yet despite all his wealth and power, the tsar was troubled by one persistent problem: he had no wife.

Many noble families offered their daughters in marriage, and portraits of beautiful princesses arrived from distant kingdoms. Archidei examined them all but remained dissatisfied. Some princesses were beautiful yet proud, others clever but cold-hearted, and still others seemed interested only in his riches. The tsar desired a bride who would be both beautiful and worthy of sharing his throne.

One day merchants returned from a far-off voyage and appeared before him.

"We have seen a maiden unlike any other in the world," they said. "Her name is Princess Helena. She lives on the distant

island of Buzan, far beyond the seas. Her beauty surpasses all description, and her wisdom is equal to her beauty.”

The tsar became interested.

“How far away is this island?”

“Ten years by ordinary sea travel,” replied the merchants.

Archidei sighed. The distance seemed impossible, yet the thought of the mysterious princess lingered in his mind.

Some time later the tsar rode out hunting. While passing through the countryside, he noticed seven peasants plowing a field together. The sight struck him as unusual because all seven men looked remarkably alike.

The tsar halted his horse and called out to them.

“Who are you?”

The eldest stepped forward.

“We are seven brothers, Your Majesty. All of us bear the name Simeon.”

The tsar was surprised.

“Seven brothers with the same name? That is strange enough. But tell me, what can each of you do?”

The first Simeon bowed.

“I can build a pillar so high that it reaches the clouds.”

The second said, “And I can climb that pillar and see everything that happens throughout the world.”

The third declared, “I can build ships unlike any ever seen. They sail faster than the wind.”

The fourth added, “Not only upon the sea. I can guide such

ships beneath the waves.”

The fifth said, “I can forge a gun that never misses its target.”

The sixth announced, “And whatever is struck or falls, I can catch it wherever it may be.”

Finally the seventh brother smiled.

“My talent is different from theirs. I am the greatest thief alive. Nothing can escape my hands if I decide to take it.”

The tsar frowned at these words.

“A thief is dangerous,” he said.

Immediately he ordered guards to seize the seventh Simeon and place him in prison. The other six brothers were brought to the capital so their talents could be tested.

The first Simeon soon demonstrated his skill. Before the astonished court, he constructed a towering column that seemed to rise into the heavens.

The second Simeon climbed to the very top. From that immense height he gazed across the world.

“What do you see?” the tsar shouted from below.

The second Simeon answered:

“I see kingdoms and cities. I see forests and mountains. And far across the sea I see the island of Buzan. Upon it stands a palace, and within that palace is Princess Helena. The merchants spoke truthfully. She is indeed beautiful beyond compare.”

Hearing this, Tsar Archidei became determined to meet her.

“But how can I reach an island that lies ten years away?”

The third Simeon stepped forward.

“I can build a vessel that will carry us there in a single week.”

Within days he completed a marvelous ship unlike any ever built. Its sails gleamed in the sunlight, and its construction seemed almost magical.

Still, the tsar faced another problem.

“Even if I reach the island, how shall I persuade the princess to leave her home and come with me?”

As the court debated, the royal fool burst into laughter.

“Why discuss persuasion when the answer sits in prison? Free the seventh Simeon. If he is truly the greatest thief in the world, let him steal the princess!”

The courtiers laughed, but the suggestion pleased the tsar.

The seventh Simeon was brought from prison.

“If you help me bring Princess Helena here,” said Archidei, “you shall receive your freedom.”

The clever Simeon thought for a moment and nodded.

“I accept.”

Soon preparations began. The third Simeon supplied the marvelous ship. The fourth Simeon came to command its secret powers beneath the sea. The fifth and sixth joined the expedition, while the seventh devised the plan.

They loaded the vessel with magnificent gifts: silks, jewels, golden goblets, rare perfumes, and treasures from every corner of the kingdom.

Then they set sail.

Thanks to the third Simeon's craftsmanship, the ship crossed

immense distances with astonishing speed. In only a week the travelers reached the island of Buzan.

Princess Helena received them graciously.

The brothers presented their treasures and spoke of distant lands. Helena was fascinated by their stories and curious about the remarkable vessel that had brought them.

At last the seventh Simeon said:

“Your Highness, would you honor us by visiting our ship? We would be delighted to show it to you.”

The princess agreed.

As soon as she stepped aboard, the visitors politely escorted her around the deck. Then, at a secret signal, the fourth Simeon put his extraordinary skill to use.

The ship slowly descended beneath the waves.

When Helena realized that the vessel was leaving the island, she understood she had been deceived.

Furious, she called upon her magical powers.

In an instant she transformed into a graceful white swan and attempted to fly away.

But the fifth Simeon raised his marvelous weapon, while the sixth prepared himself. Together they prevented her escape.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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