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Viktor Nikitin

*The World
of Russian Fairy
Tales. Book II*



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The World of Russian
Fairy Tales. Book II

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Аннотация

This second volume presents ten traditional Russian folk tales retold in clear English. The stories combine everyday life with the supernatural, featuring peasants, merchants, demons, witches, and miraculous events. Themes of justice, greed, faith, and human folly run throughout. Preserving the spirit of oral storytelling, the collection offers both moral insight and imaginative narrative, opening a six-volume series of classic folklore.

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Ivan Popyalof

Long ago an old man and an old woman had three sons. The youngest was named Ivan Popyalof because, from childhood until he was twelve years old, he spent all his time lying on the stove among the ashes.

At that time a terrible Snake appeared and laid waste to the kingdom. It devastated villages, carried people away, and spread fear everywhere. When Ivan reached the age of twelve, he suddenly rose from the stove and asked his parents to have a heavy iron mace made for him. The first one proved too light, then the second, and only the third was strong enough to satisfy him. He tested it by throwing it high into the sky and catching it as it fell. Since it remained unbroken, he knew it was fit for battle.

Ivan and his two brothers rode out in search of the monster. They eventually reached a bridge where the Snake was expected to appear. Ivan ordered his brothers to rest while he kept watch through the night.

At midnight the earth shook, the trees bent, and the dreadful Snake arrived with six heads. Ivan fought it bravely and cut off every head. The following night an even more powerful Snake with nine heads appeared, but Ivan defeated it as well after a fierce struggle. On the third night the strongest of all came — a twelve-headed Snake. The battle lasted a long time, and Ivan was nearly overcome, but at last he gathered all his strength, struck the final blow, and killed the monster.

The brothers entered the Snake's dwelling, destroyed its severed heads, and immediately light returned to the land.

As they rode home, Ivan realized he had forgotten his gloves and went back alone. Near the hut he overheard the Snake's wife and daughters planning revenge. Turning himself into a cat, he slipped inside unnoticed and listened to their plans before quietly retrieving his gloves.

After rejoining his brothers, they continued their journey. Soon they came to a meadow covered with beautiful silk cushions. The elder brothers wanted to stop and rest, but Ivan suspected a trap. He struck the cushions with his mace, and blood poured from them — they were the Snake's daughters in disguise.

Farther on they found a tree laden with golden and silver apples. Again Ivan tested it with his mace, and blood flowed

from the trunk. The enchanted daughter hidden within it was destroyed.

Later they reached a clear spring. Before anyone could drink, Ivan struck the water with his mace, and it also turned to blood. The last of the Snake's daughters had perished.

At last the Snake's Wife herself came flying after them. She opened her enormous jaws so wide that they stretched from the earth to the sky, intending to swallow Ivan whole. The brothers threw three great measures of salt into her mouth. Mistaking it for Ivan, she swallowed it, but soon realized her error and continued the pursuit.

Seeing the danger, Ivan rode to the forge of Kuzma and Demian and hid behind twelve iron doors. When the Snake's Wife demanded that the smiths surrender him, they told her to reach him with her tongue. As she pushed it through the doors, the smiths seized it with glowing iron tongs and hammered her until she died. They burned her body, scattered the ashes to the wind, and freed the land forever from the Snake's evil.

Ivan Popyalof and his brothers then returned home in peace, where they celebrated their victory with feasting and merriment. As the storyteller says, he too attended the feast, though the drink ran only down his beard instead of into his mouth.

* * *

The Norka

Once there lived a king and queen who had three sons. The two eldest were considered clever, while the youngest, Prince

Ivan, was thought to be a fool. The king owned a great park filled with wild animals, but every night a terrible beast called the Norka entered it, killing many of the animals. No one could stop it. At last the king promised that whoever destroyed the creature would receive half of his kingdom.

The eldest prince volunteered first, but instead of guarding the park, he spent the night in a tavern and returned home in disgrace. The second brother behaved no better. Finally, the youngest prince offered to try. Although everyone laughed at him, he went straight to the park, arranged his weapons so they would wake him if he fell asleep, and patiently waited.

At midnight the earth trembled as the enormous Norka burst through the fence. Ivan attacked it at once. The beast fled, and the prince pursued it on horseback. They fought fiercely, and Ivan wounded it three times before both stopped to rest. Each time the prince fell asleep, the Norka escaped, but his faithful horse woke him, allowing him to continue the chase. After three exhausting battles, the wounded beast reached a huge white stone, lifted it aside, and disappeared beneath it into the underworld, calling back that Ivan would defeat it only if he dared to follow.

The prince returned to his father and asked for a leather rope long enough to reach the world below. When it was finished, he and his brothers traveled to the place where the beast had vanished. There they built a shelter and prepared for the dangerous descent. The great stone was so heavy that neither elder brother could move it, but Ivan easily threw it aside. Since

neither brother dared enter the underworld, Ivan ordered them to lower him by the rope and wait until he signaled to be pulled back.

After reaching the lower world, Ivan wandered until he found a magnificent horse already waiting for him. The horse greeted him by name and carried him to a copper palace, where he met a beautiful princess. She welcomed him warmly and revealed that the Norka was her brother. She had treated the wounds Ivan had inflicted during their battles. She also told him that the beast was staying with her sister in a silver palace.

Ivan continued to the silver palace, where the second sister confirmed that the Norka had already gone on to their youngest sister in the golden palace. There the youngest princess explained that her brother was asleep on a rock in the middle of the blue sea. She gave Ivan a magical sword and a draught of the Water of Strength, instructing him to strike off the beast's head with a single blow.

Following her advice, Ivan crossed the sea, found the sleeping Norka, and beheaded it with one mighty stroke before it could awaken.

After the victory, the three sisters begged to accompany him to the upper world. Since they were enchantresses, each transformed her palace into a small egg and taught Ivan how to restore the palaces whenever he wished. Carrying the magical eggs, they all returned to the place where the rope hung.

Ivan first sent the three princesses upward. However, when his

brothers saw the extraordinary beauty of the maidens, jealousy filled their hearts. They decided to betray him. After lowering the rope again, they cut it while Ivan was still below. Fortunately, he had suspected treachery and tied the rope to a heavy stone instead of himself. The stone crashed to the ground, proving his fears justified.

Left alone, Ivan wandered sadly through the underworld until a violent storm broke out. Seeking shelter beneath a tree, he noticed a nest of young birds soaked by the rain. Taking pity on them, he covered them with his cloak. Soon their gigantic mother returned. Grateful for his kindness, she offered him any reward he wished. Ivan asked only to be carried back to the world above.

The great bird instructed him to prepare enough meat and water for the journey. Once everything was ready, she carried both the supplies and the prince through the air until they reached the upper world.

Back home, Ivan disguised himself as a poor servant and entered the service of a tailor. He soon learned that his brothers intended to marry the three princesses, but the maidens refused. They insisted that wedding garments identical to those they had worn in the underworld be made first, although no one knew how to create them.

Ivan secretly restored the magical palaces from their enchanted eggs during the night, collected the princesses' original clothing, and left the garments for the tailor to deliver. Later he repeated the same miracle for shoemakers and other craftsmen,

enabling each of them to satisfy another of the princesses' impossible requests.

Although the princesses recognized their own possessions and guessed that Ivan had returned, they remained silent until the wedding day. Before the ceremony, the youngest princess asked permission to distribute alms to beggars. While doing so, she noticed the ring she had once given Ivan and immediately recognized him beneath his poor disguise.

She brought him before the king and revealed that he was the true hero who had rescued them from the underworld, while his brothers had betrayed him and tried to leave him there forever.

The king became furious when he learned the truth. He punished the two elder princes as he saw fit, restored Ivan to his rightful honor, and celebrated three joyful weddings, rewarding the youngest prince for his courage, loyalty, and wisdom.

* * *

Marya Morevna

In a certain kingdom there lived Prince Ivan with his three sisters — Marya, Olga, and Anna. Before their parents died, they asked their son to marry each sister to the very first worthy suitor who sought her hand, and Ivan faithfully promised to obey their last wish.

Not long afterward, while Ivan and his sisters were walking in the royal garden, a violent storm suddenly darkened the sky. They hurried back to the palace, where the ceiling split open and a magnificent falcon flew inside. The bird transformed into a

handsome prince and asked to marry Princess Marya. Since his sister gladly accepted the proposal, Ivan blessed their marriage, and the Falcon carried her away to his distant kingdom.

A year later another storm arose. This time an eagle entered the palace, became a handsome prince, and asked for Princess Olga. She willingly accepted, and the Eagle took her to his own realm.

Another year passed, and yet another storm brought a raven into the palace. When he changed into an even more handsome prince, he asked for Princess Anna's hand. She also agreed, and the Raven carried her away.

Left entirely alone, Prince Ivan eventually decided to visit his sisters. During his journey he came upon a battlefield covered with fallen warriors. A surviving soldier told him that the entire army had been defeated by the famous warrior queen, the beautiful Marya Morevna.

Soon afterward Ivan reached her camp. Marya welcomed him with honor, and after spending several days together they fell in love and were married. She brought him to her own kingdom, where they lived happily for some time.

One day Marya prepared to leave for war. Before departing, she entrusted the entire household to Ivan, warning him that he might go wherever he wished except into one locked storeroom.

Curiosity overcame him. As soon as Marya left, Ivan unlocked the forbidden room and discovered Koshchei the Deathless chained with twelve heavy chains. Koshchei begged desperately

for water, explaining that he had suffered for ten years without food or drink. Ivan felt pity and gave him one bucket, then another, and finally a third. The moment Koshchei drank the last bucket, all his strength returned. He shattered his chains with a single effort and escaped through the window as a whirlwind, declaring that Ivan would never see Marya Morevna again.

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