

King Longbeard

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Russian

Easy

24 min read

A story about King Berendey; his son Prince Ivan; about the cunning of the immortal King Koshchey, and about the wisdom of his daughter, Princess Mary.

Once upon a time there lived King Berendey, called Longbeard, for his beard reached far below his knees. He lived very happily with his wife the queen, but God gave no children to them, and this grieved the king very much.

The king had to visit his kingdom. He bade farewell to his queen, and stayed away for a long time. At the end of the visit on a very warm afternoon, when he was approaching his capital, he decided to stop for a rest in the meadow. He felt very thirsty and wanted some cold water to drink, but there was no water around. What should he do? He was all dried up with thirst. So the king decided to ride all over the meadow, perhaps he would strike a spring. And sure enough, he soon found a well.

Hurriedly he jumped down from his horse, and looked into the well. It was full of water to the brim, and upon its surface there was floating a golden cup. The king reached his hand after the cup, but he could not grasp it. The cup swam away from his reach. He grasped impatiently at the amber handle now with his right hand, now with his left; but the handle, quickly turning to the left or to the right, as if but mocking the king, could not be caught. What was the matter? The king waited until the cup stood up again straight in the water, grasped it at once from the right and the left, but in vain! Slipping out from his hands like a fish, the cup dived straight to

the bottom, and again it was swimming on the surface as if nothing had happened.

“Now wait,” thought King Longbeard, “I will drink without you,” and stretching himself upon the grass, he began to drink with eagerness the cold spring water, forgetting about his beard, which was drowned in the water.

When he had drunk enough, he wanted to raise his head, but he could not do it: somebody was holding the king's beard and did not want to let it go. Leaning upon the fence of the well, he tried to get himself loose, shook himself, turned his head, but all was in vain; he could not free his beard. “Let me go,” cried he. No answer. Only a terrible monster looked up to him from the bottom, two big eyes shining like emeralds; the widely open mouth queerly smiling, two rows of shining pearly teeth, and a red tongue sticking out between them. The monster was laughing at the king. With its paws it was firmly holding the king's beard.

At last a hoarse voice said from under the water, “It is no use trying, King. I shall not let you go. But if you want to be free, give me that which you possess, but which you do not know about.”

The king thought, “What could that be that I have and do not know about? It seems to me that I know everything,” so he answered the monster, “All right, I agree.”

“Very well,” the hoarse voice was heard to answer once more, “but look out, keep your word, that no harm may happen to you.” With the last word the claws disappeared, with the monster.

Having freed his beard, the king mounted his horse, and continued his journey. As he entered his capital, all the people came out to meet him, cannons were playing, and all the bells were ringing from the city towers. The king approached his gilded palace. The queen was standing upon the balcony, near her the prime minister; in his arms he held a brocaded pillow upon which there was lying a baby, fair and beautiful like the moon.

Then the king guessed and groaned, “There is what I did not know about! O, you monster, you will be the death of mine!” So thought the king and cried bitterly.

All wondered, but no one said a word. Taking the baby into his arms, King Longbeard admired it long, carried it into the palace, put it into the cradle, and hiding his sorrow, he began to rule over his country as formerly. Nobody knew the king's secret. But everybody saw the king was sad—he was always expecting somebody to come for his son. During the day he found no rest, at night he could not sleep. The time was passing meanwhile, and nobody came. The young prince grew very rapidly and developed into a beautiful youth. The

king himself forgot all that happened at the well—but not everybody was so forgetful.

Once the prince, while hunting, came into a very thick forest. He looked around: a wild glade was before him. Upon it stood a hollow lime tree. A rustling came from the hollow, and a very queer looking old man came out with a green beard and green eyes.

“Hello! Prince Ivan,” said he, “we were looking for you. It is time to think of us.”

“Who are you?” asked Ivan.

“I will tell you later about it. Now do this for me: give my regards to your father, King Longbeard, and ask him whether it is not time for him to pay his debt? The term has passed long ago. He will understand the rest. Now good-bye,” and the bearded old man disappeared.

Prince Ivan, very sad and thoughtful, left the dark forest. He went straight to his father, King Longbeard.

“Dear father king,” said he, “a miracle occurred to me,”—and he told him what he had seen and heard.

The king became pale like a ghost. “Woe to me, my dear son Ivan,” cried he weeping bitterly, “I see that we must part!” and he told to his son the terrible story about his given oath.

“Do not cry, do not worry, father,” answered the prince. “The calamity is not so great. Give me a steed. I will go and you wait for me; keep the secret, that nobody may know about it, not even my mother the queen. But if I do not come back to you in a year, know that I am no longer alive.” The prince was fitted out for the journey. King Longbeard gave him gold armor, a sword, and a steed. The queen gave him her blessing and a golden cross upon his neck—and the young prince departed. What is going to happen to him?

He rode for one day, for another, for a third, and on the fourth day right after sunset, he came to a lake. The lake was smooth like glass; the water was on a level with the shores; everything around was desert. The water was covered with the rosy evening glow and the green shores with the thick reeds were reflected in it.

Everything seemed as if in a dream. The air did not move; the reeds did not stir, there was no rustle upon the light streams. The prince looked around and what did he see? Thirty crested white ducks were swimming near the shore, upon the shore were lying thirty white gowns. The prince dismounted very cautiously at some distance. Hidden by the grass he crept towards the gowns and quickly took one of them. Then he rested himself behind a bush to see what was going to happen. The ducks swam and splattered in the stream, played,

dived, and at last got to the shore. Twenty-nine of them ran to the white gowns, knocked themselves upon the ground, and all turned themselves into fair maidens, dressed and went away. But the thirtieth duck ran up and down with a pitiful cry. Shyly stretching her neck forward, she looked here and there, now flying up, now coming down again. The prince felt pity for her. He came out from behind his bush, and behold, she spoke to him in a human voice.

“Prince Ivan, give me back my gown and I will be useful to you.”

The prince did not let her wait, but put the gown upon the grass and suddenly what did he see? A maiden in white robes, young and beautiful. She gave him her hand and with downcast, bashful eyes said to him:

“Thank you, good prince, for your kindness to me. You did me a favor, but it will be of good service to you also. I am the daughter of the immortal King Koshchey, Princess Mary. He has thirty daughters altogether. He is the ruler of the underground kingdom. He has expected you as his guest for a long time, and is very angry at your delay. But do not worry. Only follow my advice. Now listen. As soon as you shall see King Koshchey, kneel and creep before him upon your knees. He will stamp with his feet, but do not be frightened. When he scolds you, do not listen, but keep on creeping before him. What will happen, you will see later. Now we must go.”

Princess Mary struck the ground with her small foot, the earth opened, and they went down into King Koshchey’s underground kingdom. They came to the palace. It was built of precious stones and shone under the ground brighter than the earthly sun. Boldly the prince entered. King Koshchey sat upon his throne wearing a glittering crown, his eyes shone like emeralds. His hands were like claws. Ivan immediately fell upon his knees. King Koshchey stamped with his feet, his green eyes glittered frightfully, and he howled so loudly that the vaults of his underground kingdom trembled. Remembering the words of the Princess Mary, Ivan crept upon his knees toward King Koshchey’s throne.

The king howled and the prince kept on creeping. Finally it seemed funny to the king. “Good for you, rogue,” said he, “if you could succeed in making me laugh, I will quarrel with you no longer. You are welcomed to our underground kingdom, but know that for your disobedience you will have to do three services for us. We will settle our accounts to-morrow. It is too late to-night. Go!”

The courtiers quickly and politely took Ivan under his arms, and carried him to a chamber, opened the door, bowed, and left him all to himself. He lay down upon the bed and soon fell asleep. The next morning very early King Koshchey called for Prince Ivan. “Well, Prince Ivan, now let us see what you can do. For instance, build

for us a palace for to-morrow. The roof must be of gold, the walls of marble, the windows of crystal; around it a regular garden, and in the garden a fish-pond. If you do it, you will get into our favor; if not, do not blame us, but you shall be executed.”

“O, you cruel King Koshchey!” thought Ivan. “This is an impossible thing for me to do.”

Greatly grieved he went to his room and thought his sad thoughts. In the evening a bright bee came flying to his window, flapped against the pane, and he heard a voice saying “Let me in!” He opened the window, the bee flew inside and turned into Princess Mary.

“Hello, Prince Ivan! Why are you so sad?”

“I have good reasons to be so. Your father wants to have me executed.”

“What have you decided to do?”

“Nothing. Let him do it. Go where you can and die where you must.”

“No, my dear Prince Ivan. We must not lose our courage. There are still greater calamities in the world than yours. Go to sleep, and get up very early. The palace will be built for you. You will only have to go around it, and knock with your hammer at the walls as if finishing your work.”

And so it was. Very early in the morning Ivan came out of his chamber, and behold! The palace was all built for him.

King Koshchey was surprised. He did not believe his own eyes. “O, you are a very skillful fellow indeed. Now let us see whether you are just as clever. I have thirty daughters, beautiful princesses. To-morrow I will place all of them in a row; you will pass three times before them and tell me which is the youngest of them. If you don’t guess, you shall die. Now go.”

“Is that hard to guess?” thought the prince, “I certainly will recognize Princess Mary.”

“It is very hard,” said the princess, who flew as a bee into his room, “and if I do not help you, you will get into trouble. We thirty sisters look all alike. So great is the resemblance between us, that our father can recognize us only by our dress.”

“What am I to do then?”

“I will tell you what: I will be the one who has a small black fly on the right cheek. But beware! Look very carefully; it is easy to make a mistake.” And the bee disappeared.

The next day the prince was again called to King Koshchey. All the princesses were there, and all dressed alike stood in a row with downcast eyes.

“Well,” said the king, “pass three times before these beauties and tell us which of them is Princess Mary.”

Ivan looked at them and thought, “What a resemblance.” He passed the first time and saw no fly; passed for the second time—still no fly; passed the third time and saw a tiny fly stealing its way across the fresh burning cheek of one of the princesses. The prince blushed and his heart was beating with joy. “Here she is, Princess Mary,” said he, giving his hand to the beauty with the fly upon her cheek.

“Ah, ah! I see there must be something wrong about it,” grumbled King Koshchey, looking angrily at the prince with his big green eyes. “It is true you did recognize Princess Mary, but how did you guess it? Wait now, I will soon find out the truth. In three hours come back to us. You will be welcomed as our guest, but you will have to prove to us your wisdom by deeds. I will light a straw, and you will have to make here upon the spot while the straw is burning, a pair of shoes. It is not hard for you. But remember if you fail to do it, you shall pay for it with your life.”

Very much irritated, Ivan returned to his room. The bee-princess was waiting for him.

“Why are you so sad again, my dear Prince Ivan?”

“How can I be joyful?” answered he. “Your father is plotting a new trick against me. He wants me to make a pair of boots while a straw is burning. Am I a shoemaker? I am a king’s son, not worse by birth than he is. He is immortal, but does this give him a right to treat me so badly?”

“So, Prince Ivan, what are you going to do now?”

“What can I do? I cannot make the boots. Let him take my head off. I do not care any longer!”

“Oh, no, my dear prince! Are we not now bride and bridegroom? I will try to save you. We will both be saved or both perish. We must run away.” Saying this the princess breathed upon the window. Her breath immediately

froze to the panes. Then she and the prince left the room, locked the door, and threw the key far away.

Arm in arm they went up, and in a minute they were in the place of entrance to the underground kingdom. The same lake, low grassy shore, fresh meadow, and upon it the good steed of Prince Ivan. As soon as the sturdy steed felt its rider, it neighed, jumped, ran straight towards him, and stood as if rooted to the spot. Ivan did not think long, but mounted the horse, lifted the princess, and off they went as quick as lightning.

Meanwhile King Koshchey sent his courtiers at the appointed hour for Prince Ivan. They came to the door and found it locked. They knocked, and from behind the Princess' breath answered in the voice of Prince Ivan, "I am coming." The servants took the answer to the king. He waited and waited and no prince came. The angry King Koshchey sent his servants again and they brought the same answer. Nobody came, King Koshchey was almost mad with anger.

"Does he want to mock me? Run, break the door, and take by force that ill-bred fellow."

The servants ran, the door was broken up. What a surprise! Nobody was inside, but the breath was loudly laughing at them.

King Koshchey almost burst with anger. "O, you miserable thief! Come here, my people! All to me, my servants! Run, all of you, in pursuit of them. They have departed."

"I hear the tramping of horses feet," whispered the princess, clasping the prince.

He dismounted, and putting his ear against the ground said, "Yes, I hear the chase, and it is quite near."

"Then we must not lose our time," said Princess Mary, and in a minute she turned into a river, the prince into an iron bridge the steed into a black raven, and the large road was divided into three smaller roads.

Swiftly the chase was coming by the fresh tracks, but when they came to the river, they stopped perplexed. Up to the bridge they could follow the track, but beyond it the track was lost. Nothing could be done. They had to go back.

King Koshchey was terribly angry when he heard about their failure. "You fools!" cried he. "The river and the bridge must have been they. Couldn't you guess it, you idiots! Go again, and do not fail to bring them with you."

The pursuit started anew.

“I hear the tramping of horses,” said Princess Mary to Prince Ivan.

He dismounted again, put his ear against the ground and said, “Yes, they are tramping, and pretty near us.”

In a second Princess Mary, together with Prince Ivan and the steed, turned into a wild dark forest. In that forest there were numberless paths, and a horse with two riders seemed to gallop through it. Now the chase came by the fresh track to the forest. They saw the riders and ran after them. The forest reached as far as King Koshchey’s underground kingdom. The chase was flying and the horse with the two riders was always before them. Now they almost reached them, now they only had to grasp them,—but no, the steed was again far behind them. And see! There they were again before the entrance to King Koshchey’s kingdom at the same place where they started their chase; and everything disappeared,—no more horse, no more forest.

With empty hands the pursuers appeared before King Koshchey. Like one mad the king tossed about. “Wait until I catch that wretch! I will go myself now. Let us see how they are going to escape me!”

Again Princess Mary whispered to Prince Ivan, “I hear tramping.”

Again he answered her, “Yes, they are approaching us.”

“Woe to us! This is my father himself; but his power reaches only to the first church. Give me the cross you wear upon your neck.”

The prince took from his neck the golden cross, the gift of his mother, gave it to the princess, and in a minute she turned into a church, he into a monk, and the steed into a bell-tower.

Right after King Koshchey came with his suite. “Did you not see any travelers pass by, my venerable man?” he asked the monk.

“Just now Prince Ivan and Princess Mary passed by; they went into the church to pray, and asked me to pray for your help, and to remember them to you if you should come to me.”

“Oh, I wish they would break their necks, the wretches!” cried King Koshchey. Turning his horse like one possessed, he returned home with his suite. After his arrival he cruelly whipped all his servants.

Ivan with the princess went further, no longer fearing the pursuit. They were riding very slowly. The sun was setting, and suddenly in the evening rays they beheld a beautiful city. Ivan was very anxious to go inside.

“Prince Ivan,” said the princess, “do not go; not in vain does my heart ache. A misfortune will happen to us.”

“What are you afraid of, dear princess? Let us go in just for a very short time. Let us see the city and then continue the journey.”

“It is not hard to get in, but it will be hard to get out. Do as you please. Go, and I will remain here, lying as a white stone upon the road. Look out, my dear, be careful. The king, queen, and their daughter will come out to meet you with a beautiful child; do not kiss that child. If you do, you will immediately forget me; then I will live no longer; I will die from grief, and you will be the cause of my death. Here at the road I will wait for you for three days. If you do not come—but good-bye now. Go.”

Bidding her farewell, the prince went into the city. At the road as a white stone remained Princess Mary. One day passed, another passed, at last the third day passed. The prince did not come. Poor Princess Mary! He did not follow her instructions. In the city he met the king, queen, and their daughter. With them came a beautiful child, a curly-headed boy, very lively, his eyes shining like bright stars. He ran straight into Ivan’s arms. The prince was so charmed with his beauty that, losing his mind, he began to kiss his warm cheeks, and at the same time his memory was darkened and he forgot about Princess Mary.

She was seized with grief, “You left me, and I do not want to live any longer.” In a moment she turned into a sky-blue flower. “Here by the road I will remain, perhaps somebody passing by will tread me down into the earth,” said she, and tears like dew-drops glittered upon the blue petals.

An old man passed that place. He saw the blue flower. Delighted with its delicate beauty, he dug it carefully out with the roots, carried it into his hut, planted it in a flowerpot, watered it and cared for it tenderly. What happened? From that time everything was changed in the poor man’s hut. Something wonderful was going on there. When the old man awoke, he found the hut all cleaned and in perfect order. There was nowhere a grain of dust to be found. At noon when he came home, the dinner was cooked and the table neatly set; he had only to sit down and eat. He wondered but could not explain matters. At last he was frightened and went to an old fairy to ask for advice.

“I will tell you what to do,” answered the fairy, “get up very early at dawn, before the cocks sing, and look about

the hut. Whatever begins to move first, cover it with this kerchief. What happens, you will see.”

The whole night the old man lay sleepless in his bed. The sun began to rise, and there was light in the hut. Suddenly he saw that the blue flower moved, flew off its thin stalk and began to fly about the room. Everything went right away to its place, everything was dusted and cleaned, and a bright fire began to burn in the stove. Quickly jumped the old man off his bed and covered the flower with the fairy’s kerchief and before him there appeared the beautiful Princess Mary.

“What have you done?” said she. “Why did you bring me to life again? My bridegroom, Prince Ivan, left me and I am forgotten by him.”

“Your Prince Ivan is getting married to-day. The wedding-feast is all ready and all the guests have arrived.”

Princess Mary cried bitterly. Then she wiped her tears. Putting on a “sarfan” (Russian national dress for women) she went into the city as a country girl. She came into the king’s kitchen. The cooks were running here and there in their white caps and aprons. There was plenty of noise, bustle, and clatter. She went up to the chief cook, and with an imploring face and a voice as sweet as a flute said, “Cook dear, allow me to bake the wedding cake for the prince.”

The cook, disturbed in his work, wanted to refuse her, but no angry word could escape his lips when he looked at her, and he answered very kindly, “Very well, fair maiden, do what you please; I myself will serve your cake to Prince Ivan.”

At the feast when all the guests were sitting around the table, the chief cook put before Ivan a large cake upon a beautiful silver plate. All the guests were surprised at the skill of the baker. But as soon as Ivan cut off the top of it, a new wonder! A pair of pigeons flew out of it. The gray male pigeon was walking upon the table, and the white female after him cooing. “Pigeon, my pigeon, stop, do not run away; you will forget me just as Prince Ivan has forgotten Princess Mary.”

Ivan groaned when he heard this. He jumped up like mad, and ran to the door behind which Mary was waiting. Before the palace the black steed all saddled and bridled, was impatiently stamping the ground. They did not tarry. Ivan and his princess rode away. After a long journey they arrived in King Longbeard’s kingdom, where the old king and queen gave them a joyful reception. They prepared for the wedding; guests were invited and a great feast feasted. And I was there and feasted with them, and that is the end of the whole story.

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