



# *The Nickerman's Wife: The Story of Lidushka and the Imprisoned Doves*

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*Easy*  
*7 min read*

There was once a young housewife named Lidushka. One day while she was washing clothes in the river a great frog, all bloated and ugly, swam up to her. Lidushka jumped back in fright. The frog spread itself out on the water, just where Lidushka had been rinsing her clothes, and sat there working its jaws as if it wanted to say something.

“Shoo!” Lidushka cried, but the frog stayed where it was and kept on working its jaws.

“You ugly old bloated thing! What do you want and why do you sit there gaping at me?”

Lidushka struck at the frog with a piece of linen to drive it off so that she could go on with her work. The frog dived, came up at another place, and at once swam back to Lidushka.

Lidushka tried again and again to drive it away. Each time she struck at it, the frog dived, came up at another

place, and then swam back. At last Lidushka lost all patience.

“Go away, you old fat thing!” she screamed. “I have to finish my wash! Go away, I tell you, and when your babies come I’ll be their godmother! Do you hear?”

As if it accepted this as a promise, the frog croaked: “All right! All right! All right!” and swam off.

Some time after this, when Lidushka was again doing her washing at the river, the same old frog appeared not looking now so fat and bloated.

“Come! Come, my dear!” it croaked. “You remember your promise! You said you’d be godmother to my babies. You must come with me now for we’re having the christening today.”

Lidushka, of course, had spoken jokingly, but even so a promise is a promise and must not be broken.

“But, you foolish frog,” she said, “how can I be godmother to your babies? I can’t go down in the water.”

“Yes, you can!” the old frog croaked. “Come on! Come on! Come with me!”

It began swimming upstream and Lidushka followed, walking along the shore and feeling every moment more frightened.

The old frog swam on until it reached the mill-dam. Then it said to Lidushka:

“Now, my dear, don’t be afraid! Don’t be afraid! Just lift that stone in front of you. Under it you’ll find a flight of stairs that lead straight down to my house. I’ll go on ahead. Do as I say and you can’t miss the way.”

The frog disappeared in the water and Lidushka lifted the stone. Sure enough there was a flight of stairs going down under the mill-dam. And what kind of stairs do you suppose they were? They were not made of wood or stone but of great solid blocks of water, laid one on another, transparent and clear as crystal.

Lidushka timidly went down one step, then another, and another, until halfway down she was met by the old frog who welcomed her with many noisy croaks.

“This way, dear godmother! This way! Don’t be afraid! Don’t be afraid!”

Lidushka picked up courage and took the remaining stairs more bravely. The frog then led her to its house which, like the stairs, was built of beautiful crystal water, sparkling and transparent.

Inside everything was in readiness for the christening. Lidushka at once took the baby frogs in her arms and held them during the ceremony.

After the christening came a mighty feast to which many frogs from near and far had been invited. The old frog presented them all to Lidushka and they made much ado over her, hopping about her and croaking out noisy compliments.

Fish course after fish course was served—nothing but fish, prepared in every possible manner: boiled and broiled and fried and pickled. And there was every possible kind of fish: the finest carp and pike and mullet and trout and whiting and perch and many more of which Lidushka didn't even know the names.

When she had eaten all she could, Lidushka slipped away from the other guests and wandered off alone through the house.

She opened by chance a door that led into a sort of pantry. It was lined with long shelves and on the shelves were rows and rows of little earthenware pots all turned upside down. It seemed strange to Lidushka that they should all be upside down and she wondered why.

She lifted one pot up and under it she found a lovely white dove. The dove, happy at being released, shook out its plumage, spread its wings, and flew away.

Lidushka lifted a second pot and under it there was another lovely dove which at once spread its fluttering wings and flew off as happy as its fellow.

Lidushka lifted up a third pot and there was a third dove.

“There must be doves under all these pots!” she told herself. “What cruel creature has imprisoned them, I wonder? As the dear God has given man a soul to live forever, so He has given the birds wings to fly, and He never intended them to be imprisoned under dark pots. Wait, dear doves, and I'll set you all free!”

So Lidushka lifted pot after pot and from under every one of them an imprisoned dove escaped and flew

joyously away.

Just as she had lifted the last pot, the old frog came hopping in to her in great excitement.

“Oh, my dear, my dear!” she croaked. “What have you done setting free all those souls! Quick and get you a lump of dry earth or a piece of toasted bread or my husband will catch you and take your soul! Here he comes now!”

Lidushka looked up through the crystal walls of the house but could see no one coming. Then in the distance she saw some beautiful bright red streamers floating towards her on the top of the water. They came nearer and nearer.

“Oh!” she thought to herself in sudden fright. “Those must be the red streamers of a nickerman!”

Instantly she remembered the stories her grandmother used to tell her when she was a child, how the wicked nickerman lured people to their death with bright red streamers. Many an innocent maid, haying along the river, has seen the lovely streamers in the water and reached after them with her rake. That is what the nickerman wants her to do for then he can catch her and drag her down, down, down, under the water where he drowns her and takes her soul. The nickerman is so powerful that, if once he gets you, he can drown you in a teaspoon of water! But if you clutch in your hand a clod of dry earth or a piece of toasted bread, then he is powerless to harm you.

“Oh!” Lidushka cried. “Now I understand! Those white doves were the souls of poor innocents whom this wicked nickerman has drowned! God help me to escape him!”

“Hurry, my dear, hurry!” the old frog croaked. “Run up the crystal stairs and replace the stone!”

Lidushka flew up the stairs and as she reached the top she clutched a handful of dry earth. Then she replaced the stone and the water flowed over the stairs.

The nickerman spread out his red streamers close to the shore and tried to catch her, but she was not to be tempted.

“I know who you are!” she cried, holding tight her handful of dry earth. “You’ll never get my soul! And you’ll

never again imprison under your black pots all the poor innocent souls I liberated!”

Years afterwards when Lidushka had children of her own, she used to tell them this story and say to them:

“And now, my dears, you know why it is dangerous to reach out in the water for a red streamer or a pretty water lily. The wicked nickerman may be there just waiting to catch you.”

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