

# *The Death of Koshchei the Deathless*

Andrew Lang'S Fairy Books

Slavic

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*Easy*  
*21 min read*

In a certain kingdom there lived a Prince Ivan. He had three sisters. The first was the Princess Marya, the second the Princess Olga, the third the Princess Anna. When their father and mother lay at the point of death, they had thus enjoined their son: `Give your sisters in marriage to the very first suitors who come to woo them. Don't go keeping them by you!'

They died, and the Prince buried them, and then, to solace his grief, he went with his sisters into the garden green to stroll. Suddenly the sky was covered by a black cloud; a terrible storm arose.

`Let us go home, sisters!' he cried.

Hardly had they got into the palace, when the thunder pealed, the ceiling split open, and into the room where they were came flying a falcon bright. The Falcon smote upon the ground, became a brave youth, and said:

`Hail, Prince Ivan! Before I came as a guest, but now I have come as a wooer! I wish to propose for your sister, the Princess Marya.'

`If you find favour in the eyes of my sister, I will not interfere with her wishes. Let her marry you, in God's name!'

The Princess Marya gave her consent; the Falcon married her and bore her away into his own realm.

Days follow days, hours chase hours; a whole year goes by. One day Prince Ivan and his two sisters went out to stroll in the garden green. Again there arose a storm-cloud, with whirlwind and lightning.

`Let us go home, sisters!' cries the Prince. Scarcely had they entered the palace when the thunder crashed, the roof burst into a blaze, the ceiling split in twain, and in flew an eagle. The Eagle smote upon the ground and became a brave youth.

`Hail, Prince Ivan! I Before I came as a guest, but now I have come as a wooer!'

And he asked for the hand of the Princess Olga. Prince Ivan replied:

`If you find favour in the eyes of the Princess Olga, then let her marry you. I will not interfere with her liberty of choice.'

The Princess Olga gave her consent and married the Eagle. The Eagle took her and carried her off to his own kingdom.

Another year went by. Prince Ivan said to his youngest sister:

`Let us go out and stroll in the garden green!'

They strolled about for a time. Again there arose a storm-cloud, with whirlwind and lightning.

`Let us return home, sister!' said he.

They returned home, but they hadn't had time to sit down when the thunder crashed, the ceiling split open, and in flew a raven. The Raven smote upon the floor and became a brave youth. The former youths had been handsome, but this one was handsomer still.

`Well, Prince Ivan! Before I came as a guest, but now I have come as a wooer! Give me the Princess Anna to

wife.'

'I won't interfere with my sister's freedom. If you gain her affections, let her marry you.'

So the Princess Anna married the Raven, and he bore her away into his own realm. Prince Ivan was left alone. A whole year he lived without his sisters; then he grew weary, and said:

'I will set out in search of my sisters.'

He got ready for the journey, he rode and rode, and one day he saw a whole army lying dead on the plain. He cried aloud, 'If there be a living man there, let him make answer! Who has slain this mighty host?'

There replied unto him a living man:

'All this mighty host has been slain by the fair Princess Marya Morevna.'

Prince Ivan rode further on, and came to a white tent, and forth came to meet him the fair Princess Marya Morevna.

'Hail, Prince!' says she; 'whither does God send you? and is it of your free will or against your will?'

Prince Ivan replied, 'Not against their will do brave youths ride!'

'Well, if your business be not pressing, tarry awhile in my tent.'

Thereat was Prince Ivan glad. He spent two nights in the tent, and he found favour in the eyes of Marya Morevna, and she married him. The fair Princess, Marya Morevna, carried him off into her own realm.

They spent some time together, and then the Princess took it into her head to go a warring. So she handed over all the house-keeping affairs to Prince Ivan, and gave him these instructions:

'Go about everywhere, keep watch over everything; only do not venture to look into that closet there.'

He couldn't help doing so. The moment Marya Morevna had gone he rushed to the closet, pulled open the door, and looked in— there hung Koshchei the Deathless, fettered by twelve chains. Then Koshchei entreated Prince Ivan, saying:

‘Have pity upon me and give me to drink! Ten years long have I been here in torment, neither eating nor drinking; my throat is utterly dried up.’

The Prince gave him a bucketful of water; he drank it up and asked for more, saying:

‘A single bucket of water will not quench my thirst; give me more!’

The Prince gave him a second bucketful. Koshchei drank it up and asked for a third, and when he had swallowed the third bucketful, he regained his former strength, gave his chains a shake, and broke all twelve at once.

‘Thanks, Prince Ivan!’ cried Koshchei the Deathless, ‘now you will sooner see your own ears than Marya Morevna!’ and out of the window he flew in the shape of a terrible whirlwind. And he came up with the fair Princess Marya Morevna as she was going her way, laid hold of her and carried her off home with him. But Prince Ivan wept full sore, and he arrayed himself and set out a- wandering, saying to himself, ‘Whatever happens, I will go and look for Marya Morevna!’

One day passed, another day passed; at the dawn of the third day he saw a wondrous palace, and by the side of the palace stood an oak, and on the oak sat a falcon bright. Down flew the Falcon from the oak, smote upon the ground, turned into a brave youth, and cried aloud:

‘Ha, dear brother-in-law! how deals the Lord with you?’

Out came running the Princess Marya, joyfully greeted her brother Ivan, and began inquiring after his health, and telling him all about herself. The Prince spent three days with them; then he said:

‘I cannot abide with you; I must go in search of my wife, the fair Princess Marya Morevna.’

‘Hard will it be for you to find her,’ answered the Falcon. ‘At all events leave with us your silver spoon. We will look at it and remember you.’ So Prince Ivan left his silver spoon at the Falcon’s, and went on his way again.

On he went one day, on he went another day, and by the dawn of the third day he saw a palace still grander than the former one and hard by the palace stood an oak, and on the oak sat an eagle. Down flew the Eagle from the oak, smote upon the ground, turned into a brave youth, and cried aloud:

‘Rise up, Princess Olga! Hither comes our brother dear!’

The Princess Olga immediately ran to meet him, and began kissing him and embracing him, asking after his health, and telling him all about herself. With them Prince Ivan stopped three days; then he said:

‘I cannot stay here any longer. I am going to look for my wife, the fair Princess Marya Morevna.’

‘Hard will it be for you to find her,’ replied the Eagle. ‘Leave with us a silver fork. We will look at it and remember you.’

He left a silver fork behind, and went his way. He travelled one day, he travelled two days; at daybreak on the third day he saw a palace grander than the first two, and near the palace stood an oak, and on the oak sat a raven. Down flew the Raven from the oak, smote upon the ground, turned into a brave youth, and cried aloud:

‘Princess Anna, come forth quickly I our brother is coming.’

Out ran the Princess Anna, greeted him joyfully, and began kissing and embracing him, asking after his health and telling him all about herself. Prince Ivan stayed with them three days; then he said:

‘Farewell! I am going to look for my wife, the fair Princess Marya Morevna.’

‘Hard will it be for you to find her,’ replied the Raven. ‘Anyhow, leave your silver snuff-box with us. We will look at it and remember you.’

The Prince handed over his silver snuff-box, took his leave, and went his way. One day he went, another day he went, and on the third day he came to where Marya Morevna was. She caught sight of her love, flung her arms around his neck, burst into tears, and exclaimed:

‘Oh, Prince Ivan! why did you disobey me and go looking into the closet and letting out Koshchei the Deathless?’

‘Forgive me, Marya Morevna! Remember not the past; much better fly with me while Koshchei the Deathless is out of sight. Perhaps he won’t catch us.’

So they got ready and fled. Now Koshchei was out hunting. Towards evening he was returning home, when his good steed stumbled beneath him.

‘Why stumblest thou, sorry jade? Scentest thou some ill?’ The steed replied:

‘Prince Ivan has come and carried off Marya Morevna.’ ‘Is it possible to catch them?’

‘It is possible to sow wheat, to wait till it grows up, to reap it and thresh it, to grind it to flour, to make five pies of it, to eat those pies, and then to start in pursuit—and even then to be in time.’ Koshchei galloped off and caught up Prince Ivan.

‘Now,’ says he, ‘this time I will forgive you, in return for your kindness in giving me water to drink. And a second time I will forgive you; but the third time beware! I will cut you to bits.’

Then he took Marya Morevna from him, and carried her off. But Prince Ivan sat down on a stone and burst into tears. He wept and wept—and then returned back again to Marya Morevna. Now Koshchei the Deathless happened not to be at home.

‘Let us fly, Marya Morevna!’

‘Ah, Prince Ivan! he will catch us.’

‘Suppose he does catch us. At all events we shall have spent an hour or two together.’

So they got ready and fled. As Koshchei the Deathless was returning home, his good steed stumbled beneath

him.

`Why stumblest thou, sorry jade? Scentest thou some ill?'

`Prince Ivan has come and carried off Marya Morevna.'

`Is it possible to catch them?'

`It is possible to sow barley, to wait till it grows up, to reap it and thresh it, to brew beer, to drink ourselves drunk on it, to sleep our fill, and then to set off in pursuit—and yet to be in time.'

Koshchei galloped off, caught up Prince Ivan:

`Didn't I tell you that you should not see Marya Morevna any more than your own ears?'

And he took her away and carried her off home with him.

Prince Ivan was left there alone. He wept and wept; then he went back again after Marya Morevna. Koshchei happened to be away from home at that moment.

`Let us fly, Marya Morevna!'

`Ah, Prince Ivan! he is sure to catch us and hew you in pieces.'

`Let him hew away! I cannot live without you.'

So they got ready and fled.

Koshchei the Deathless was returning home when his good steed stumbled beneath him.

`Why stumblest thou? Scentest thou any ill?'

`Prince Ivan has come and has carried off Marya Morevna.'

Koshchei galloped off, caught Prince Ivan, chopped him into little pieces, put them into a barrel, smeared it with pitch and bound it with iron hoops, and flung it into the blue sea. But Marya Morevna he carried off home.

At that very time the silver articles turned black which Prince Ivan had left with his brothers-in-law.

‘Ah!’ said they, ‘the evil is accomplished sure enough!’

Then the Eagle hurried to the blue sea, caught hold of the barrel, and dragged it ashore; the Falcon flew away for the Water of Life, and the Raven for the Water of Death.

Afterwards they all three met, broke open the barrel, took out the remains of Prince Ivan, washed them, and put them together in fitting order. The Raven sprinkled them with the Water of Death—the pieces joined together, the body became whole. The Falcon sprinkled it with the Water of Life—Prince Ivan shuddered, stood up, and said:

‘Ah! what a time I’ve been sleeping!’

‘You’d have gone on sleeping a good deal longer if it hadn’t been for us,’ replied his brothers-in-law. ‘Now come and pay us a visit.’

‘Not so, brothers; I shall go and look for Marya Morevna.’

And when he had found her, he said to her:

‘Find out from Koshchei the Deathless whence he got so good a steed.’

So Marya Morevna chose a favourable moment, and began asking Koshchei about it. Koshchei replied:

‘Beyond thrice nine lands, in the thirtieth kingdom, on the other side of the fiery river, there lives a Baba Yaga. She has so good a mare that she flies right round the world on it every day. And she has many other splendid mares. I watched her herds for three days without losing a single mare, and in return for that the Baba Yaga gave me a foal.’

‘But how did you get across the fiery river?’

‘Why, I’ve a handkerchief of this kind—when I wave it thrice on the right hand, there springs up a very lofty bridge, and the fire cannot reach it.’

Marya Morevna listened to all this, and repeated it to Prince Ivan, and she carried off the handkerchief and gave it to him. So he managed to get across the fiery river, and then went on to the Baba Yaga's. Long went he on without getting anything either to eat or to drink. At last he came across an outlandish bird and its young ones. Says Prince Ivan:

`I'll eat one of these chickens.'

`Don't eat it, Prince Ivan!' begs the outlandish bird; `some time or other I'll do you a good turn.'

He went on farther and saw a hive of bees in the forest.

`I'll get a bit of honeycomb,' says he.

`Don't disturb my honey, Prince Ivan!' exclaims the queen- bee; `some time or other I'll do you a good turn.'

So he didn't disturb it, but went on. Presently there met him a lioness with her cub.

`Anyhow, I'll eat this lion cub,' says he; `I'm so hungry I feel quite unwell!'

`Please let us alone, Prince Ivan!' begs the lioness; `some time or other I'll do you a good turn.'

`Very well; have it your own way,' says he.

Hungry and faint he wandered on, walked farther and farther, and at last came to where stood the house of the Baba Yaga. Round the house were set twelve poles in a circle, and on each of eleven of these poles was stuck a human head; the twelfth alone remained unoccupied.

`Hail, granny!'

`Hail, Prince Ivan! wherefore have you come? Is it of your own accord, or on compulsion?'

`I have come to earn from you an heroic steed.'

‘So be it, Prince! You won’t have to serve a year with me, but just three days. If you take good care of my mares, I’ll give you an heroic steed. But if you don’t—why, then you mustn’t be annoyed at finding your head stuck on top of the last pole up there.’

Prince Ivan agreed to these terms. The Baba Yaga gave him food and drink, and bade him set about his business. But the moment he had driven the mares afield, they cocked up their tails, and away they tore across the meadows in all directions. Before the Prince had time to look round they were all out of sight. Thereupon he began to weep and to disquiet himself, and then he sat down upon a stone and went to sleep. But when the sun was near its setting the outlandish bird came flying up to him, and awakened him, saying:

‘Arise, Prince Ivan! The mares are at home now.’

The Prince arose and returned home. There the Baba Yaga was storming and raging at her mares, and shrieking:

‘Whatever did ye come home for?’

‘How could we help coming home?’ said they. ‘There came flying birds from every part of the world, and all but pecked our eyes out.’

‘Well, well! to-morrow don’t go galloping over the meadows, but disperse amid the thick forests.’

Prince Ivan slept all night. In the morning the Baba Yaga says to him:

‘Mind, Prince! if you don’t take good care of the mares, if you lose merely one of them—your bold head will be stuck on that pole!’

He drove the mares afield. Immediately they cocked up their tails and dispersed among the thick forests. Again did the Prince sit down on the stone, weep and weep, and then go to sleep. The sun went down behind the forest. Up came running the lioness.

‘Arise, Prince Ivan! The mares are all collected.’

Prince Ivan arose and went home. More than ever did the Baba Yaga storm at her mares and shriek:

`Whatever did ye come back home for?'

`How could we help coming back? Beasts of prey came running at us from all parts of the world, and all but tore us utterly to pieces.'

`Well, to-morrow run off into the blue sea.'

Again did Prince Ivan sleep through the night. Next morning the Baba Yaga sent him forth to watch the mares.

`If you don't take good care of them,' says she, `your bold head will be stuck on that pole!'

He drove the mares afield. Immediately they cocked up their tails, disappeared from sight, and fled into the blue sea. There they stood, up to their necks in water. Prince Ivan sat down on the stone, wept, and fell asleep. But when the sun had set behind the forest, up came flying a bee, and said:

`Arise, Prince! The mares are all collected. But when you get home, don't let the Baba Yaga set eyes on you, but go into the stable and hide behind the mangers. There you will find a sorry colt rolling in the muck. Do you steal it, and at the dead of night ride away from the house.'

Prince Ivan arose, slipped into the stable, and lay down behind the mangers, while the Baba Yaga was storming away at her mares and shrieking:

`Why did ye come back?'

`How could we help coming back? There came flying bees in countless numbers from all parts of the world, and began stinging us on all sides till the blood came!'

The Baba Yaga went to sleep. In the dead of the night Prince Ivan stole the sorry colt, saddled it, jumped on its back, and galloped away to the fiery river. When he came to that river he waved the handkerchief three times on the right hand, and suddenly, springing goodness knows whence, there hung across the river, high in the air, a splendid bridge. The Prince rode across the bridge and waved the handkerchief twice only on the left hand; there remained across the river a thin, ever so thin a bridge!

When the Baba Yaga got up in the morning the sorry colt was not to be seen! Off she set in pursuit. At full speed did she fly in her iron mortar, urging it on with the pestle, sweeping away her traces with the broom. She dashed up to the fiery river, gave a glance, and said, 'A capital bridge!' She drove on to the bridge, but had only got half-way when the bridge broke in two, and the Baba Yaga went flop into the river. There truly did she meet with a cruel death!

Prince Ivan fattened up the colt in the green meadows, and it turned into a wondrous steed. Then he rode to where Marya Morevna was. She came running out, and flung herself on his neck, crying:

'By what means has God brought you back to life?'

'Thus and thus,' says he. 'Now come along with me.'

'I am afraid, Prince Ivan! If Koshchei catches us you will be cut in pieces again.'

'No, he won't catch us! I have a splendid heroic steed now; it flies just like a bird.' So they got on its back and rode away.

Koshchei the Deathless was returning home when his horse stumbled beneath him.

'What art thou stumbling for, sorry jade? Dost thou scent any ill?'

'Prince Ivan has come and carried off Marya Morevna.'

'Can we catch them?'

'God knows! Prince Ivan has a horse now which is better than I.'

`Well, I can't stand it,' says Koshchei the Deathless. `I will pursue.'

After a time he came up with Prince Ivan, lighted on the ground, and was going to chop him up with his sharp sword. But at that moment Prince Ivan's horse smote Koshchei the Deathless full swing with its hoof, and cracked his skull, and the Prince made an end of him with a club. Afterwards the Prince heaped up a pile of wood, set fire to it, burnt Koshchei the Deathless on the pyre, and scattered his ashes to the wind. Then Marya Morevna mounted Koshchei's horse and Prince Ivan got on his own, and they rode away to visit first the Raven, and then the Eagle, and then the Falcon. Wherever they went they met with a joyful greeting.

`Ah, Prince Ivan! why, we never expected to see you again. Well, it wasn't for nothing that you gave yourself so much trouble. Such a beauty as Marya Morevna one might search for all the world over—and never find one like her!'

And so they visited, and they feasted; and afterwards they went off to their own realm.

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