

The Frog-Tsarevna

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Russian

Intermediate

7 min read

In a certain kingdom, in a certain Empire, there lived a Tsar with his Tsaritsa, and he had three sons, all of them young, valiant, and unwedded, the like of whom is not to be told in tales nor written by pens, and the youngest of them was called the Tsarevich Ivan. And the Tsar spoke these words to them: “My dear children, take unto you your darts, gird on your well-spanned bows, and go hence in different directions, and in whatsoever courts your arrows fall, there choose ye your brides!”

The elder brother discharged his arrow and it fell into a boyar’s court, right in front of the *terem* of the maidens. The second brother discharged his arrow, and it flew into the court of a merchant and remained sticking in a beautiful balcony, and on this balcony was standing a lovely young maiden soul, the merchant’s daughter. The youngest brother discharged his arrow, and the arrow fell in a muddy swamp, and a quacking-frog seized hold of it.

The Tsarevich Ivan said to his father: “How can I ever take this quacker to wife? A quacker is not my equal!”—“Take her!” replied his father, “’tis thy fate to have her!”

So the Tsareviches all got married—the eldest to the boyar’s daughter, the second to the merchant’s daughter, and the youngest to the quacking-frog. And the Tsar called them to him and said: “Let your wives, tomorrow morning, bake me soft white bread.”

The Tsarevich Ivan returned home, and he was not happy, and his impetuous head hung down lower than his

shoulders. “Qua, qua! Ivan the Tsarevich! wherefore art thou so sad?” asked the Frog. “Or hast thou heard unpleasant words from thy father the Tsar?”—“Why should I not be sad? my father and sovereign lord hath commanded thee to bake soft white bread to-morrow.”—“Do not afflict thyself, O Tsarevich! lie down and rest, the morning is wiser than the evening.”

She made the Tsarevich lie down and rest, cast her frog-skin, and turned into a maiden soul, Vasilisa Premudraya, went out upon her beautiful balcony, and cried with a piercing voice: “Nurseys—nurseys! assemble, set to work and make me soft white bread such as I myself used to eat at my dear father’s!”

In the morning the Tsarevich Ivan awoke, the frog had got the bread ready long ago, and it was so splendid that the like of it is neither to be imagined nor guessed at, but is only to be told of in tales. The loaves were adorned with various cunning devices, royal cities were modelled on the sides thereof, with moats and ditches. The Tsar praised the Tsarevich Ivan greatly because of his bread, and gave this command to his three sons: “Let your wives weave me a carpet in a single night.”

The Tsarevich Ivan returned home, and he was sad, and his impetuous head hung lower than his shoulders. “Qua! qua! Tsarevich Ivan! wherefore art thou so sad? Or hast thou heard cruel, unfriendly words from thy father the Tsar?”—“Have I not cause to grieve? My father and sovereign lord commands thee to weave him a silk carpet in a single night!”

—“Fret not, Tsarevich! come, lay thee down and sleep, the morning is wiser than the evening!” Then she made him lie down to sleep, threw off her frog-skin, and turned into the lovely maiden soul, Vasilisa Premudraya, went forth upon her beautiful balcony, and cried with a piercing voice: “Nurseys—nurseys! assemble, set to work and weave me a silk carpet such as I was wont to sit upon at my dear father’s!”

No sooner said than done. In the morning the Tsarevich Ivan awoke, and the frog had had the carpet ready long ago, and it was such a wondrous carpet that the like of it can only be told of in tales, but may neither be imagined nor guessed at. The carpet was adorned with gold and silver and with divers bright embroiderings. The Tsar greatly praised the Tsarevich Ivan for his carpet, and there and then gave the new command that all three Tsareviches were to appear before him on the morrow to be inspected together with their wives.

Again the Tsarevich Ivan returned home and he was not happy, and his impetuous head hung lower than his shoulders. “Qua! qua! Tsarevich Ivan! wherefore art thou grieved? Or hast thou heard words unkind from thy father the Tsar?”—“Have I not cause to be sad?

My father and sovereign lord has commanded me to appear before him with thee to-morrow! How can I show thee to people?”—“Fret not, Tsarevich! Go alone to the Tsar and pay thy visit, and I will come after thee. The moment you hear a rumbling and a knocking, say: ‘Hither comes my dear little Froggy in her little basket!’”

And behold the elder brothers appeared, to be inspected with their richly-attired and splendidly-adorned consorts. There they stood and laughed at the Tsarevich Ivan and said: “Why, brother! why hast thou come hither without thy wife? Why thou mightest have brought her with thee in a kitchen clout. And where didst thou pick up such a beauty? I suppose thou didst search through all the swamps fairly?”

Suddenly there was a great rumbling and knocking, the whole palace shook. The guests were all terribly frightened and rushed from their places, and knew not what to do with themselves, but the Tsarevich Ivan said: “Fear not, gentlemen! ’tis only my little Froggy coming in her little basket!”

And then a golden coach drawn by six horses flew up to the steps of the Tsar’s balcony, and out of it stepped Vasilisa Premudraya; such a beauty as is only to be told of in tales, but can neither be imagined nor guessed at. The Tsarevich Ivan took her by the hand and led her behind the oaken table, behind the embroidered tablecloth. The guests began to eat and drink and make merry. Vasilisa Premudraya drank wine, but the dregs of her cup she poured behind her left sleeve; she ate also of the roast swan, but the bones thereof she concealed behind her right sleeve.

The wives of the elder brothers watched these devices, and took care to do the same. Afterwards when Vasilisa Premudraya began dancing with the Tsarevich Ivan, she waved her left hand and a lake appeared; she waved her right hand and white swans were swimming in the water; the Tsar and his guests were astonished. And now the elder brides began dancing. They waved their left hands and all the guests were squirted with water; they waved their right hands and the bones flew right into the Tsar’s eyes. The Tsar was wroth, and drove them from court with dishonour.

Now one day the Tsarevich Ivan waited his opportunity, ran off home, found the frog-skin, and threw it into a great fire. Vasilisa Premudraya duly arrived, missed her frog-skin, was sore troubled, fell a-weeping, and said

to the Tsarevich: "Alas! Tsarevich Ivan! what hast thou done? If thou hadst but waited for a little, I should have been thine for ever more, but now farewell! Seek for me beyond lands thrice-nine, in the Empire of Thrice-ten, at the house of Koshchei Bezsmertny." Then she turned into a white swan and flew out of the window.

The Tsarevich Ivan wept bitterly, turned to all four points of the compass and prayed to God, and went straight before his eyes. He went on and on, whether it was near or far, or long or short, matters not, when there met him an old, old man. "Hail, good youth!" said he, "what dost thou seek, and whither art thou going?" The Tsarevich told him all his misfortune.

"Alas! Tsarevich Ivan, why didst thou burn that frog-skin? Thou didst not make, nor shouldst thou therefore have done away with it. Vasilisa Premudraya was born wiser and more cunning than her father; he was therefore angry with her, and bade her be a frog for three years. Here is a little ball for thee, follow it whithersoever it rolls." Ivan the Tsarevich thanked the old man, and followed after the ball. He went along the open plain, and there met him a bear.

"Come now!" thought the Tsarevich Ivan, "I will slay this beast." But the bear implored him: "Slay me not, Tsarevich Ivan, I may perchance be of service to thee somehow." He went on further, and lo! behind them came waddling a duck. The Tsarevich bent his bow; he would have shot the bird, when suddenly she greeted him with a human voice: "Slay me not, Ivan Tsarevich! I also may befriend thee!"

He had compassion on her, and went on further, and a hare darted across their path. The Tsarevich again laid an arrow on his bow and took aim, but the hare greeted him with a human voice: "Slay me not, Tsarevich Ivan! I also will befriend thee!" Ivan the Tsarevich had pity upon him, and went on further to the blue sea, and behold! on the beach lay gasping a pike. "Alas! Tsarevich Ivan!" sighed the pike, "have pity on me and cast me into the sea."

And he cast it into the sea, and went on along the shore. The ball rolled a short way, and it rolled a long way, and at last it came to a miserable hut; the hut was standing on hen's legs and turning round and round. The Tsarevich Ivan said to it: "Little hut, little hut! stand the old way as thy mother placed thee, with thy front to me, and thy back to the sea!" And the little hut turned round with its front to him, and its back to the sea.

The Tsarevich entered in, and saw the bony-legged Baba-Yaga lying on the stove, on nine bricks, and grinding her teeth.—"Hillo! good youth, why dost thou visit me?" asked the Baba-Yaga.—"Fie, thou old hag! thou call'st me a good youth, but thou shouldst first feed and give me to drink, and prepare me a bath, then only shouldst

thou ask me questions.” The Baba-Yaga fed him and gave him to drink, and made ready a bath for him, and the Tsarevich told her he was seeking his wife, Vasilisa Premudraya.

“I know,” said the Baba-Yaga, “she is now with Koshchei Bezsmertny. ’Tis hard to get thither, and it is not easy to settle accounts with Koshchei. His death depends upon the point of a needle, that needle is in a hare, that hare is in a coffer, that coffer is on the top of a high oak, and Koshchei guards that tree as the apple of his eye.”

The Baba-Yaga then showed him in what place that oak grew; the Tsarevich Ivan went thither, but did not know what to do to get at the coffer. Suddenly, how who can tell, the bear rushed at the tree and tore it up by the roots, the coffer fell and was smashed to pieces, the hare leaped out, and with one bound had taken cover. But look! the other hare bounded off in pursuit, hunted him down and tore him to bits; out of the hare flew a duck and rose high, high in the air, but the other duck dashed after her, and struck her down, whereupon the duck laid an egg, and the egg fell into the sea.

The Tsarevich Ivan, seeing the irreparable loss of the egg, burst into tears, when suddenly the pike came swimming ashore holding the egg between its teeth. He took the egg, broke it, drew out the needle and broke off its little point. Then he attacked Koshchei, who struggled hard, but wriggle about as he might he had to die at last. Then the Tsarevich Ivan went into the house of Koshchei, took out Vasilisa Premudraya, and returned home. After that they lived together for a long, long time, and were very, very happy.

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