



The Seven Brothers Simeon

The Russian Garland

Russian

Intermediate

12 min read

There were once upon a time two old serfs, who lived together for many years without children; and in their old age they prayed for a child to keep them from want when they were no longer able to labour. After seven years the good woman gave birth to seven sons, who were all named Simeon; but when these boys were in their tenth year, the old folk died, and the sons tilled the ground which their father left them.

It chanced one day that the Tsar Ador drove past, and wondered sore to see such little fellows all busy at work in their field. So he sent his oldest boyar to ask them whose children they were, and why they were working so hard, and the eldest Simeon answered, that they were orphans, and had no one to work for them, and that they were all called Simeon. When the boyar told this to Tsar Ador, he ordered the boys to be brought along with him.

On returning to the palace, the Tsar called together all his boyars, and asked their advice, saying: "My boyars, you see here seven poor orphans, who have no kinsfolk; I am resolved to make such men of them that they shall hereafter have cause to thank me; and therefore I ask your advice—what handicraft or art shall I have them taught?" Then the boyars replied: "Your Majesty, seeing that they are old enough to have understanding, it would be well to ask each brother separately what craft he wishes to learn."

This answer pleased the Tsar, and he said to the eldest Simeon: "Tell me, friend, what art or trade would you like to learn? I will apprentice you to it." But Simeon answered: "Please your Majesty, I wish to learn no art; but

if you will command a smithy to be put up in the middle of your court, I will raise a column which shall reach to the sky." By this time the Tsar at once saw that the first Simeon wanted indeed no teaching if he was so good a smith as to do such work; but he did not believe that he could make so tall a pillar; so he ordered a smithy to be built in his courtyard, and the eldest Simeon straightway set to work.

Then the Tsar asked the second Simeon: "What craft or art would you learn, my friend?" and the lad replied: "Your Majesty, I will learn neither craft nor art; but when my eldest brother has smithied the iron column, I will mount to the top of it, look around over the whole world, and tell you what is passing in every kingdom." So the Tsar saw there was clearly no need to teach this brother, as he was clever enough already.

Thereupon he questioned the third Simeon: "What craft or what art will you learn?" He replied: "Your Majesty, I want to learn neither craft nor art; but if my eldest brother will make me an axe I will build a ship in the twinkling of an eye." When the Tsar heard this he exclaimed: "Such master workers are just the men I want! Thou also hast nothing to learn."

Then he asked the fourth Simeon: "Thou Simeon, what craft or what art will thou learn?" and he answered: "Your Majesty, I need to learn nothing; but when my third brother has built a ship, and the ship is attacked by enemies, I will seize it by the prow, and draw it into the kingdom under the earth; and when the foe has departed, I will bring it back again upon the sea." The Tsar was astonished at such marvels, and replied: "In truth you have nothing to learn."

Then he asked the fifth Simeon: "What trade or what art would you learn, Simeon?" And he replied: "I need none, your Majesty; but when my eldest brother has made me a gun, I will shoot with it every bird that flies, however distant, if I can see it." And the Tsar said: "You'll be a famous hunter truly!"

The Tsar now asked the sixth Simeon: "What art will you learn?" and he replied in like manner: "Sire, I will follow no art, but when my fifth brother has shot a bird in the air I will catch it before it falls to the ground, and bring it to your Majesty." "Bravo!" said the Tsar; "you will serve in the field as well as a retriever."

Thereupon the Tsar enquired of the last Simeon what craft or art he would learn. "Your Majesty," he replied, "I will learn neither craft nor trade, for I am already skilled in a precious art." "What kind of art do you understand then?" said the Tsar. "I understand how to steal better than any man alive." When the Tsar heard of such a wicked art, he grew angry, and said to his boyars: "My Lords, how do you advise me to punish this thief Simeon? What death shall he die?" But they all replied: "Wherefore, O Tsar, should he die? Who knows but that

he may be a clever thief, and prove useful in case of need?" "How so?" said the Tsar. "Your Majesty," replied the boyars, "has for ten long years sued for the hand of the beautiful Tsarina Helena in vain, and has already lost many armies and great store of money. Who knows but that this thief Simeon may in some way steal the fair Tsarina for your Majesty."

"Well spoken, my friends," replied the Tsar; and, turning to the thief Simeon, he said: "Hark you, friend, can you pass through thrice nine lands into the thirtieth kingdom and steal for me the fair Queen Helena? I am in love with her, and if you can bring her to me I will reward you richly."

"Leave it to us," answered Simeon; "your Majesty has only to command."

"I do not order you, I entreat you then," said the Tsar, "not to tarry longer at my Court, but take with you all the armies and treasure you require." "I want not your armies nor your treasure," said Simeon; "only send us brothers forth together; without the rest I can do nothing." The Tsar was unwilling to let them all go; nevertheless he was obliged to consent.

Meanwhile the eldest Simeon had finished the iron column in the smithy of the palace-yard. Then the second Simeon climbed up it, and looked around on all sides, to see whereabouts the kingdom of fair Helena's father lay; and presently he called out to the Tsar Ador: "Please, your Majesty, beyond thrice nine lands, in the thirtieth kingdom, sits the fair Tsarina at her window. How beautiful she is! One can see the very marrow of her bones, her skin is so clear." On hearing this the Tsar was more in love than ever, and cried aloud to the Simeons: "My friends, set out instantly on your journey, and come back as soon as possible; I can no longer live without the fair Tsarina."

So the eldest Simeon made for the third brother a gun, and took bread for their travels; and the thief Simeon took a cat with him, and so they set out. Now thief Simeon had so accustomed this cat to him, that she ran after him everywhere like a dog; and whenever he stopped, she sat up on her hind legs, rubbed her coat against him and purred. So they all went their way, until they came to the shore of the sea over which they must sail. For a long time they wandered about, seeking wood, to build a ship with. At last they found a huge oak. Then the third Simeon took his axe and laid it at the root of the tree, and in the twinkling of an eye the oak was felled, and a ship built from it, fully rigged, and in the ship there were all kinds of costly wares.

After some months' voyage they arrived safely at the place to which they were bound, and cast anchor. The next day Simeon the thief took his cat and went into the city; and walking straight up to the Tsar's palace, he stood

under the window of Queen Helena. Immediately his cat sat up on her hind legs, and fell to rubbing him and purring. But you must know that no cat had ever been seen or heard of in this country, nor was anything known of such an animal.

The fair Tsarina Helena was sitting at her window, and observing the cat, she sent her attendants to inquire of Simeon what kind of animal it was, and whether he would sell it, and for how much. And when the servants asked him, Simeon replied: "Tell her Majesty that this creature is called a cat, but I cannot consent to sell her; if, however, her Majesty pleases, I shall have the honour of presenting the cat to her."

So the attendants ran back and told what they had heard from Simeon; and when the Tsarina Helena knew it, she was overjoyed, and went herself to him, and asked why he would not sell it, but would only give it to her. Then she took the cat in her arms, went into her room, and invited Simeon to accompany her; and, going to her father, the Tsar Sarg, the Tsarina showed him the cat, and told him that a stranger had presented it to her. The Tsar gazed at the wonderful animal with delight, and commanded the thief Simeon to be summoned; and when he came, the Tsar wanted to reward him richly for the cat. But Simeon would not take anything; and the Tsar said: "Stay here in my palace for a time, and meanwhile the cat will become better used to my daughter in your presence."

Simeon, however, had no desire to remain, and answered: "Your Majesty, I would stay in your palace with pleasure had I not a ship, in which I came to your kingdom, and which I cannot entrust to anyone; but if your Majesty pleases, I will come every day to the palace and accustom the cat to your fair daughter."

This offer pleased the Tsar: so every day Simeon went to the fair Queen; and once he said to her: "Gracious Lady, Your Majesty, often as I have come to visit you, I have not observed that you ever go out to take a walk. If you will come once on board my ship, I will show you a quantity of fine wares, diamonds and gold brocades, more beautiful than you have ever seen before." Thereupon the Tsarina went to her father and asked his permission to take a walk upon the quay. The Tsar consented, bidding her take her attendants and lady's-maids with her.

When they came to the quay, Simeon invited the Tsarina on board his ship, where he and his brothers displayed to her all kinds of wares. Then said Simeon the thief to the fair Helena: "You must order your attendants to leave the ship, and I will show you some more costly wares which they must not see." So the Tsarina ordered them to return to shore; and Simeon the thief instantly desired his brothers to cut the cable,

set all the sails, and put out to sea.

Meantime he amused the Tsarina by unpacking the wares and making her various presents. In this manner hours passed by; and at last she told him it was time for her to return home, as her father would be expecting her back. So saying, she went up from the cabin and perceived that the ship was already far out at sea, and almost out of sight of land. Thereat she beat her breast, changed herself into a swan, and flew away. But in an instant the fifth Simeon seizing his gun, fired at her; and the sixth brother caught her before she fell into the water, and placed her on the deck, when the Tsarina changed back into a woman.

Meanwhile the attendants and lady's-maids, who were standing on the shore, and had seen the ship sail away with the Tsarina, went and told the Tsar of Simeon's treachery. Then the Tsar instantly commanded his whole fleet to go in pursuit; and it had already got very near to the Simeons' ship when the fourth brother seized the vessel by the prow and drew it into the subterranean region. When the ship disappeared, all the sailors in the fleet thought it had sunk, together with the beautiful Tsarina Helena, and went back to the Tsar Sarg and told him the sad tidings. But the seven brothers Simeon returned safely to their own country, and conducted the Tsarina Helena to Tsar Ador, who gave the Simeons their freedom as a reward for the services they had rendered, together with much gold and silver and precious stones. And the Tsar lived with the beautiful Queen Helena for many years in peace and happiness.

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