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"The Bird of Happiness"



Level 2

A Tale From Russia

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The Bird of Happiness

A long time ago, a little boy called Igor lived with his mother and father in a small house which was made of wood.

Igor's family was very poor. His father was a woodcutter, and his mother made clothes for rich people in the city. Their house was in the middle of a large forest in the north of Russia. In summer, the days were long and the forest was alive with the sounds of birds singing to each other. Igor's father taught him the names of the different birds, and the boy soon knew all their songs. But in winter, the days were very short, and there was deep snow everywhere. The forest became quiet because the birds left to spend the winter months in warmer countries.

One winter, Igor became ill. His mother made special food and drink for him, but he only got worse. The doctor from the city came to see Igor, and spent some time talking with the boy, and looking at him. Then he spoke to Igor's mother and father.

'He's very ill, but I don't know what's wrong with him. This winter many young children all over the country are becoming ill and dying, and nobody knows why. I'm sorry but there's nothing that I can do to help. Give him lots of good things to eat, and make sure that he gets lots of sleep.'

During the next few days, Igor got worse. He became iller and iller. He spent all day in bed, and became bored with his toys. His father brought him little things from the forest to try to make him forget that he was ill, but he was not interested in anything. His face became white, and he didn't want to eat. Sometimes at night he had a fever, and then he dreamt that he was flying above the forest, looking at his family's little house far below him.

One morning, after a very bad night, Igor woke up and found his father looking at him.

'Is there anything that you want?' said his father.

'Yes, there is, Father,' said Igor. 'I miss the songs of the birds. Could you catch a bird and put it in a cage for me? If you put the cage above my bed, I can listen to the bird singing and remember the sounds of the forest.'

'Of course, little Igor,' said his father, smiling. 'I'll bring you your bird tomorrow.'

But he knew that, now it was winter, there were no birds in the forest. This was the only thing that his son wanted, and he could not give it to him.

'Perhaps you could make him a bird out of wood?' said Igor's mother. 'You could use one of those little pieces of wood that we usually burn on the fire.'

It was a cold, snowy day, and the forest trees were hard to cut. But all day, while he was working, Igor's father thought about how to make his son a bird out of wood. 'Of course it'll never sing,' he said to himself, 'but perhaps if it's very beautiful, little Igor will like it just the same.'

After dinner that night, he started making the bird. The first few times that he tried were no good. The finished birds were all too fat and too heavy to fly. He put them one by one on the fire, and held his head in his hands. It was now the middle of the night, and outside more snow was falling. Then he suddenly said to himself, 'I know! The bird needs to be just two pieces of wood. If I cut the wood carefully, the bird can have real feathers.' First he took a piece of wood for the head, body and tail. He began with the tail, cutting the wood into feathers with his right hand. Then, with his left hand, he smoothed out the feathers. When he was happy with the tail, he took some more wood for the wings. He cut them out carefully. It all took a long time because sometimes the feathers broke and he had to start again. But in the end, he finished it. While the sun was beginning to come up he showed the bird to his wife.

'It's beautiful,' she said. 'But it's not ready yet.'

She took a needle and some thread and carefully sewed the ends of the tail-feathers and wing-feathers together. Soon the feathers were all together, just like on a real bird. Then she tied a long thread to the middle of the bird's back. This way they could hang it above Igor's bed. They looked at the bird together.

'Now that it's ready,' said the woodcutter, 'I'll take it into little Igor's room.'

Igor was asleep. Very quietly the father hung the bird above the boy's bed. He stood back and looked at it. The bird turned slowly on its thread. The woodcutter went happily to his bed to rest after his long night's work.

Later that morning, he went back into Igor's room. The bird was turning slowly above Igor's head. His son was watching the bird carefully. There was a light in his eyes for the first time in many weeks.

'It's beautiful, Father,' said Igor. 'Thank you. But I've never seen a bird like it before in the forest. What's it called?'

'That's a good question. I'll find out and tell you later.'

The next morning, when the woodcutter went into his son's room, he found the boy sitting up in bed, trying to touch the bird. 'The last time that Igor sat up in bed was many weeks ago,' he thought.

'So what's it called, Father?' the boy asked.

'I'm still not sure,' his father replied.

That night, Igor's father went into his son's room and he quietly made the thread a little shorter. Now the bird was hanging a little higher above Igor's head. Three days later, he found Igor kneeling on the bed, trying to touch the bird. His hand was very near it.

'Have you decided on the name of my bird, Father?' Igor asked.

'Not yet, my son. I'll tell you later,' his father replied.

Again the father went at night into his son's room and put the bird a little higher. Five days later, Igor was standing on the bed, and nearly touching the bird. 'Father, help me. I want to make it go round,' he said.

'Go on trying. It's not as high as you think,' replied his father.

'And when will you tell me its name?'

'Very soon, my son,' replied the father.

Seven days later, Igor's father was cutting wood when he heard strange sounds coming from the house. He ran quickly to his son's bedroom. Igor was jumping up and down on his bed, laughing. Above his head the bird was going round very fast.

'Look, Father. I touched the bird!' shouted Igor happily. 'Now, please tell me. What's its name?'

'It's called the bird of happiness,' his father replied. And his mother, standing at the door, smiled to see her young son so full of life once more.

- THE END -

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