

Ilya Muromets

Ilya Muromets is, like Lancelot, a legendary figure who was the greatest knight of the court and most represented the values it stood for. Legends about Muromets might have been created during the difficult period when Russia was under the Tatar yoke and ancient cities had to fight for their independence. Muromets is the subject of many ancient song-legends. Here is an interpretation of several stories.

According to one legend, Ilya Muromets, the son of a peasant family in the town of Murom, was born a cripple who could not walk. His family left him lying on the great stove in their house every day when they went out to work. One day when Ilya was alone, several men in old rags came to the house. "Good day, Ilya Muromets, good day, famous knight, You are protector of the Russian land and invincible victor over enemies."



Ilya replied to them gloomily: "Whom do you call knight? Me, a cripple? I cannot walk, people laugh at me." The men persuaded him to stand up, chanting: "Get up, Ilya Muromets, joy to your eager heart, straighten your strong shoulders, stretch your quick legs."

Suddenly Ilya became joyful and stood up. And, Oh! A miracle! He could walk, jump, dance and felt great power surge through his body. He was healed.

Meanwhile his elderly parents were trying to take out tree roots and stumps for a new field. They worked very hard, but were not successful. All of a sudden they heard a great noise, the ground shook, the forest cracked. It was Ilya who came to help them and did so very quickly. The parents did not believe their eyes, "Is it you, dear son? Who gave you the strength and healed you?"

He replied: "Good day, my dear parents, several guests visited me today and gave me power beyond belief."

Ilya chose a strong foal named Karushka and took good care of him, walked him, washed him and said to him, "You will be a knight's horse and your duty will be difficult." In the smithy several masters hammered arms and armor for the knight Ilya. They made chain mail, a steel sword, a big lance and a purple shield.

They asked him where he would go. "My path is to the city of Kiev," Ilya answered and after his equipment was ready he rode to Kiev.

On the way, he stopped at the city of Chernigov. It happened that Tatars were besieging the city. Ilya attacked them and won a famous victory. The Tatar troops ran away. The citizens of Chernigov opened the gates and welcomed the knight with bread and salt. They asked him to be leader of their army. He thanked the citizens for such an honor, but told them he must continue on to Kiev.

Ilya's way was through dark, pathless, swampy forests, Chornye Gryazi. There were no animals around, no birds. In the dark forest there lived an evil highwayman named Solovey ("nightingale") who lay in wait atop a great tree and robbed travelers by killing them with a terrible loud whistle. When Solovey heard the horse's hoofbeats he became angry. He let out a whistle more fearful than a wolf's howl, a bear's roar, an animal's bark. From his horrible whistle the leaves on the trees withered. Ilya Muromets raised his heavy bow and fired an arrow that hit Solovey in the forehead. The highwayman fell from his tree at Ilya's feet. Ilya put him across his horse and went to Kiev.

The knight arrived at noon, when Prince Vladimir and his knights were eating their midday meal. Vladimir asked the stranger knight where he was from. Ilya answered, "I am Ilya, the son of a peasant. I am from the town of Murom. In the city of Chernigov I went to matins, then I listened to Solovey's whistle."

Everybody at the table laughed, and Prince Vladimir said sternly, "What are you talking about, young man? Chernigov is besieged by Tatars. The Chyornye Gryazi is a terrible place. Wolves and bears avoid going there because of the terrible Solovey. Whoever hears his whistle falls dead."

Ilya took them all into the courtyard and there was Solovey tied to Ilya's horse. Prince Vladimir saw the highwayman and decided to test him: "Well, whistle! Bark like an animal, hiss like a snake!" Solovey drank a whole pail of wine and started to whistle so loud that the leaves blew from the trees and a great sandstorm began. Only Ilya could stop him. The evil Solovey was executed by Prince Vladimir's knights. Prince Vladimir was so impressed he invited Ilya to become one of his knights. Ilya became the greatest defender of Rus against its enemies.