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THE FIRST FISH

Translated from the Russian by Natalie Ward

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What Hands Are For

Pete and his grandfather were great friends. They discussed everything together.

Once Granddad asked his grandson:

"What do people need hands for, Pete?"

"To play ball," Pete replied.

"And what else?" asked his grandfather.

"To hold a spoon."

"And what else?"

"To stroke the cat."

"And what else?"

"To throw pebbles into the river."

Pete answered his grandfather all evening and all his answers were correct. Only he judged everyone else's hands by his own and not by Mummy's or Daddy's or by the hard-working hands which keep the whole world going.

How Masha Became A Big Girl



Little Masha just could not wait to grow up. But she did not know how she was going to do it. She tried everything; she went about in her Mummy's shoes and sat around in her Granny's housecoat; she wore her hair like Auntie Kate; she tried on beads and wore a watch on her wrist.

Nothing happened. They only laughed at her. Then one day Masha decided she would sweep the floor and did so. She swept it so well that even her Mummy was surprised:

"You really are getting a big girl, aren't you?"

But when Masha had washed the dishes until they really shone and then dried them until they were bone dry, not only her Mummy but even her Daddy was surprised. He was so surprised that he said in front of everyone at the table:

"We never noticed how our Masha has grown up. She not only sweeps the floor but washes up as well."

Now everyone calls little Masha a big girl, and she does feel grown although she goes about in her tiny shoes and her short little dress, and no longer has a grown up hairstyle, or beads or a watch.

It's not these things, obviously, that make little ones big.



The Hasty Knife

Dima was shaving a stick, but finally he gave up. The stick turned out crooked, uneven and ugly.

"Why, what's wrong?" Dima's father asked him.

"The knife's bad," Dima replied. "It shaves crookedly."

"Oh no," his father said. "Your knife's all right. It's only in a hurry. It will have to learn to be patient."

"But how?" Dima asked.

"Like this," answered his father.

He took the stick and began to shave it ever so gently and carefully. Dima saw how he had to teach his knife to be patient and also began to shave gently and carefully. For a long time the hasty knife did not want to obey him. It hurried along, trying to dart this way and that but Dima did not let it. He had taught it to be patient.

And so the knife began to cut well—it shaved evenly, beautifully and obediently.





The First Fish

Yuri came from a large happy family. Everyone worked in the family except for Yuri. He was only five.

One day Yuri's family went out to fish. They caught a lot of fish and gave them all to Granny for a fish soup. Yuri caught a fish too—a ruff—and also gave it to Granny for the soup.

Granny made the soup and all the family sat down on the river bank around the pot and began to compliment Granny on her soup.

“The reason why our soup is so delicious is that Yuri caught that enormous ruff. The soup is so strong and tasty because ruff is richer than sheat-fish.”

But although Yuri was little he realised that the grown-ups were joking. How could a little fish make the soup tasty? But he was glad all the same. He was glad because his fish was in this large family's soup even if it was only a small one.

Who?

Three little girls once began arguing about which of them would be top of the form when they went to school.

"I shall be top," said Lucy, "because my Mummy has already bought me a school satchel."

"No, I will be," said Katie. "My Mummy's made me a school dress with a white apron."

"Oh, no—I shall be," Lena argued with her friends. "I've not only been given a satchel, a pencil case, a school dress with a white apron but two ribbons for my plaits, too."



The little girls went on arguing until they grew hoarse. They ran off to find their friend, Masha. Let her judge who would be top of the form.

They found Masha, but she was busy reading her ABC book.

"I don't know who will be top," Masha replied, "I haven't the time. I've still got three more letters to learn today."

"What for?" her friends asked.

"So that I don't come bottom of the form," Masha replied and began reading her book again.

Lucy, Katie and Lena were silent. There was no point in arguing about who would be top. It was so obvious.





Phil

Phil used to boast he could do everything: he knew how to do everything. Phil was made to cut the grass. He spent all day doing it but he did not finish cutting it properly. He just wasted his time.

"What's gone wrong with you, Phil?"

"The scythe is blunt," Phil replied, "One moment it's trying to run into the ground and the next it's sliding above the grass. I'd better go and graze the cows."

Phil began to graze the cows. The herd scattered in all directions and it took them a long time to round them up again.

"What went wrong with you, Phil?"

"Nothing," Phil answered. "It was the owners' fault—they didn't tie the cows' feet. How can I graze them when they are not tied up? They wander off any old way. I'd better go and take care of the boat."



Phil began to steer the boat. It just could not keep to a straight course and finally it got stuck on a sand-bank.

"What's wrong with you, Phil?"

"I wasn't given a wedge," replied Phil.

"What sort of wedge?"

"The sort you wedge a rudder with so that the boat doesn't stray all over the place. I'd better go and play the violin."

Phil began to play his violin; the village dogs started howling and the cats hid in the lofts. People ran out into the streets.

"Why do you carry on like this, Phil? Why did you boast that you could do everything?"

"But, you see, I can do everything I want to with my eyes, only my hands won't obey me. They're to blame for it all, not I."

Once again Phil talked his way out of it and seemed to be in the right. But since then no one has trusted the braggart with any work.





The Nesting-Boxes

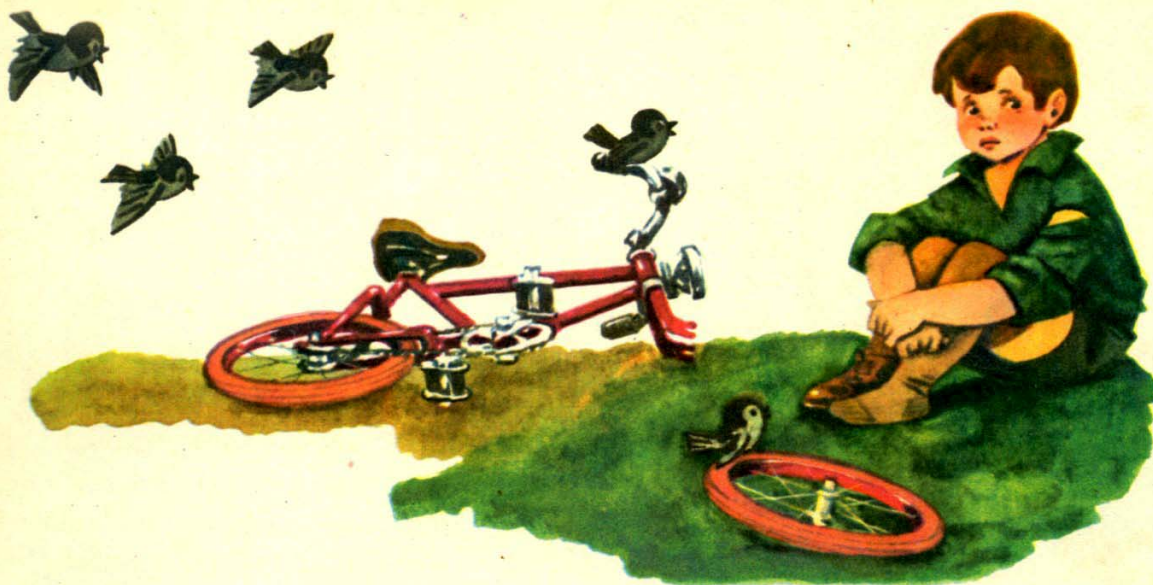
Vassya and Vanya had already decided by the time they were seven that they were going to be builders. They wanted to build big houses but that would take a long time and they wanted to build something right now.

So they decided to begin by building small houses: nesting-boxes for birds.

Although a nesting-box for starlings looks simple enough, building one is not at all simple. Last year the boys made a lot of nesting-boxes, but the starlings would not settle in them. The boxes were full of cracks and there were nails sticking out inside them. And starlings are fussy birds: they will not live in any old house.

Vassya and Vanya realised this. They planed the boards until they were smooth. They nailed them firmly together so that not a single crack would be left. They took care to see that the nails did not stick out.

You can see at once that one day these boys will be good builders, and the houses which they build will be as solid and comfortable as their nesting-boxes.



How Mike Wanted To Outwit His Mother!

Mike's Mummy came home from work and threw up her hands in surprise:

"How on earth did you manage to break a wheel off your tricycle, Mike? "

"It broke off itself, Mummy."

"But why is your shirt torn? "

"It tore itself, Mummy."

"But where's your other shoe disappeared to? Where did you lose it? "

"It lost itself somewhere or other."

Then Mike's Mummy said:

"How dreadful they all are! The horrors will have to be taught a good lesson! "

"But how? " Mike asked.

"It's very simple," Mummy replied. "If they've learnt how to break themselves, tear themselves and lose themselves, let them learn how to mend themselves, sew up themselves and find themselves. And you and I, Mike, will sit at home and wait until they have done it all."

Mike sat by his broken tricycle, in his torn shirt without his shoe and began to have a good think.



The Successful Fisherman

On the river Usolka three grown-up fishermen barely caught two dozen roach during the whole morning. But a young fellow further along the river bank was catching fish after fish all the time and during the morning caught no less than five or six dozen roach.

When the fishermen asked him:

“How come you are so successful and we aren’t? Perhaps you’re in a good place for fishing?”

“Of course not,” the young fellow replied, “I can find fish anywhere.”

So saying, he tugged at his line and pulled out a transparent glass bottle. The bottle was filled with water and teeming with fine red worms.

“The fish see them, but they can’t get at them. So they crowd round the bottle, and I cast my line beside it. They start to nibble straight away!” laughed the lad.

“Well, you’re a crafty one,” thought the fishermen, and decided to take a leaf out of the youngster’s book.





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