

# *Cunning Ileana*

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Romanian

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*Intermediate*  
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Once upon a time something happened. If it had not happened, it would not be told.

There was once an emperor who had three daughters; the oldest was beautiful, the middle one more beautiful, but the youngest, Ileana, was so fair that even the sun stopped to gaze at her and admire her charms.

One day the emperor received the news that his neighbor, a mighty monarch, was no longer friendly, but wanted to fight with him on account of a great imperial feud. The emperor consulted the old men of the country, and, seeing there was nothing else to be done, he commanded his valiant soldiers to mount their horses, take their weapons, and prepare for the terrible battle which was to be fought.

Before mounting himself, the emperor called his daughters, addressed a few fatherly, touching words to them, and gave each one a beautiful flower, a merry little bird, and a rosy-cheeked apple.

“Whoever has her flower wither, her bird mope or her apple rot, I shall know has not kept her faith,” said the wise emperor; then mounting his steed he wished them “Good-health” and set off with his brave soldiers on their toilsome way.

When the neighboring emperor's three sons heard the news that the emperor had quitted his home and gone to the war, they made an agreement among themselves and sprang on their horses to ride to the palace and vex the monarch by making his three daughters faithless to his trust. The oldest prince, a brave, spirited, handsome fellow, went first to see how matters stood and bring tidings afterward to the others.

Three days and three nights the champion stood under the wall, but not one of the girls had appeared at the windows. In the gray dawn of the fourth day he lost patience, plucked up his courage, and tapped on the oldest princess's window.

"What is it—what is it? What is wanted?" asked the royal maiden, roused from her sleep.

"It is I, little sister," said the prince, "I, an emperor's son, who have stood under your window three days for love of you."

The princess did not even approach the window, but replied in a prudent tone:

"Go back home by the way you came; may flowers spring up before you and thorns remain behind."

After three more days and nights the prince again knocked on the girl's window. This time the princess approached it, and said in a more gentle voice:

"I told you to go back home by the way you came; may thorns spring up before you and flowers remain behind."

Once more the prince waited three days and three nights under the maiden's window. In the gray dawn of the tenth day, that is after thrice three days and thrice three nights had passed, he smoothed his hair and for the third time tapped on the window.

"What is it? Who is it? What is wanted?" asked the princess, this time somewhat more sternly than before.

"It is I, little sister," said the prince. "For thrice three days I have stood longingly under your window. I would like to see your face, gaze into your eyes, and watch the words flow from your lips!"

The princess opened the window, glanced angrily at the handsome youth, and said in a scarcely audible voice:

"I would willingly look into your face and say a word or two to you, but first go to my younger sister—then

come to me.”

“I’ll send my younger brother,” replied the prince. “But give me one kiss to make my way home pleasanter.”

And almost before he had spoken, he snatched a kiss from the beautiful girl.

“May no second one fall to your lot,” said the princess, wiping her mouth with her embroidered sleeve. “Go back home by the way you came; may flowers spring up before you and flowers remain behind.”

The prince went back to his brothers and told them all that had happened, and the second took his departure.

After this prince had stood under the second princess’s window nine times nine days and nine times nine nights and tapped for the ninth time at her window, she opened it and said to him kindly:

“I would like to look at you and say a word or two to you, but first go to my youngest sister, then come to me.”

“I’ll send my youngest brother,” said the prince. “But give me one kiss, that I may hurry the faster.”

He had scarcely said it, when he stole a kiss.

“May no second one fall to your lot,” said this royal maiden too. “Go back home by the way you came, may flowers spring up before you and flowers remain behind!”

The prince returned to his brothers, told them all that had happened, and—for the third time—a hero departed, the youngest son. When he reached the palace where the three sisters lived Ileana was standing at the window, and when she saw him, said merrily:

“You handsome champion with the royal face, where are you hurrying, that you urge on your steed so hotly?”

When the prince saw Ileana’s face and heard Ileana’s words, he stopped, gazed at her, and answered boldly:

“I’m hurrying to the sun to steal one of its rays, to give to its sister and take her home, where she shall become my bride. Now, little sister, I will stop on my way to look at you, gaze at the radiance of your face, say a word to you and steal a word in reply.”

Ileana cleverly answered: “If your nature is like your words, if your soul is like your face, proud and beautiful,

and mild and gentle, I will gladly call you into the house, seat you at a banquet, give you food and drink and kisses.”

The prince sprang from his horse as he heard these words, and answered boldly:

“My nature will be like my speech, my heart like my face; let me in, seat me at the banquet, you shall never repent it from dawn till nightfall.”

He had scarcely uttered the words when he leaped upon the window-sill, jumped through the window into the room, went through the room to the table, and took his place at the very top, where the emperor had sat when he was a bridegroom.

“Stop, stop!” said Ileana. “First let me see whether you are what you ought to be, and then we’ll talk and begin our love-making. Can you make roses grow on burdocks?”

“No!” said the prince.

“Then the thistle is your flower,” said clever Ileana. “Can you make the bat sing in a sweet voice?”

“No!” said the prince.

“Then night is your day,” said clever Ileana. “Can you make apples grow on wolf’s-bane?”

“That I can!” said the prince.

“Then that shall be your fruit!” replied the beautiful and cunning Ileana. “Sit down at the table.”

The prince took his place. Ah! but Ileana was indeed cunning Ileana. Ere he had fairly seated himself, he dropped, chair and all, into the deep cellar where the emperor’s treasures were kept.

Ileana now began to scream: “Help!” and when all the servants came rushing in to see what had happened, she told them she had heard a noise and was afraid that some one had got into the cellar to rob the emperor of his treasures. The servants did not waste many words, but instantly opened the iron door and went into the cellar, where they found the prince and brought him in disgrace to be sentenced.

Ileane pronounced judgment.

Twelve girls under punishment for some offense were to carry him out of the country, and when they had reached the frontier with him, each one was to give him a kiss.

The order was obeyed. When the prince reached home and joined his brothers, he told them the whole story, and after every thing had been related their hearts were filled with rage. So they sent word to the two older princesses that they must arrange to have Ileane go to the three princes' court, so that they might revenge themselves upon her for the insult she had offered them. When the oldest daughter received this message from the prince she pretended to be sick, called Ileane to her bedside, and told her that she could not get well unless Ileane brought her something to eat from the princes' kitchen.

Ileane would have done any thing for her sister's sake, so she took a little jug and set off for the court of the three princes, to beg or steal. When she reached the palace, she rushed breathlessly into the kitchen and said to the head-cook:

"For heaven's sake, don't you hear the emperor calling you? Make haste, and see what is the matter."

The cook took to his heels and ran as fast as he could, as though he had received an imperial command. Ileane, left alone in the kitchen, filled her jug with food, emptied all the dainty dishes that were on the fire upon the floor, and went away.

When the princes heard of this insult they were still more enraged than before, sent another message to the two sisters and again prepared a revenge. As soon as the second sister received the news, she, too, pretended to be ill, called Ileane to her bed, and told her that she could not get well unless she tasted the wine in the princes' cellar. Ileane would have done any thing for her sister, so she took the little jug and prepared to go again.

When she reached the court she rushed into the cellar, and, panting for breath, said to the head-butler:

“For heaven’s sake, don’t you hear the emperor calling you? Make haste and see what is the matter.” The butler took to his heels and ran as if he had received an imperial command. Ileana filled her jug with wine, poured out the rest on the cellar floor, and then hurried home.

The princes sent a third message to the two princesses and told them they must send Ileana in a different way from what they had done before. This time both the princesses feigned illness, called their sister to them, and told her that they could not get well unless Ileana brought them two of the princes’ apples.

“My dear sisters,” replied Ileana, “I would go through fire and water for you, how much more willingly to the princes.” Taking the little jug she set off to find, seize, and bring back the fruit and save her dear sisters’ lives.

When the youngest prince learned that Ileana was coming to the garden to steal the golden apples, he gave orders that, if groans were heard there, nobody must dare go in, but let the person who was wailing, moan in peace. Then he hid huge knives, swords, spears, and many other things in the earth under the tree that bore the golden apples, concealing them so that only the sharp points rose out of the ground. After he had finished, he hid himself in a clump of bushes and waited for Ileana. She came to the gate, and seeing the two huge lions that kept guard there flung each of them a piece of meat; the lions began to tear it, and the princess went to the apple tree, stepped cautiously between the knives, swords, spears, and other things, and climbed into it.

“May this do you much good, little sister,” said the prince. “I’m glad to see you in my garden.”

“The pleasure is mine,” replied Ileana, “since I have so brave and handsome a prince for my companion. Come, climb the tree and help me pick some apples for my dear sisters, who are dangerously ill and have asked for them.”

The prince wanted nothing better—he meant to pull Ileana from the tree among the knives.

“You are very kind, Ileana,” he replied, “be kinder still and give me your hand to help me up into the tree.”

“Your plan is wicked,” thought Ileana, “but it shall work your own misfortune.” She gave him her hand, pulled him up the trunk to the branches, and then let him drop among the knives, swords, spears and other such things, which had been put there for her own destruction.

“There you are,” she said, “now you will know what you meant to do.”

The hero with the black soul began to shriek and groan—but nobody came to help him; they left him, according to his own orders, to moan in peace, and he was obliged to bear his terrible sufferings patiently.

Ileane took her apples, carried them home, gave them to her sisters, and then went back to the imperial palace and told the servants to go and rescue their master from his great danger.

The prince, who had been so abominably treated, sent for the most skillful witch in the whole country to come and give him a cure for his wounds. But Ileane had gone to the witch first and offered her a great deal of money to let her, Ileane, go to the court in her place. So Ileane went to the palace disguised as the witch. She ordered a buffalo hide to be soaked in vinegar three days and three nights, then taken out and wrapped around the wounded youth. But the prince’s cuts only burned the more, and his sufferings became still more unbearable. When he saw that he was in a bad way, he sent for a priest that he might relieve his heart before he died and give him the sacrament. But Ileane was not idle. She went to the priest, offered him a large sum of money, and induced him to let her go to the palace instead. So Ileane arrived at the court disguised as a priest.

When she approached the prince’s bed he was at the point of death, there were scarcely three breaths left in him.

“My son,” said the false priest, Ileane, “you have summoned me to confess your sins to me. Think of the hour of death, and tell me all you have on your heart. Are you at variance with any one? Yes, or no?”

“With no one,” replied the prince, “except Ileane, the youngest daughter of the emperor, our neighbor. And I hate her out of love and longing,” he continued. “If I should not die, but recover, I will ask the emperor for her hand in marriage, and if I don’t kill her the first night she shall be my faithful wife according to the law.” Ileane heard these words, said a few in reply, and then went home. Here she soon understood why her sisters were wailing and lamenting, for they had heard that the emperor was returning home from the great war.

“You ought to rejoice,” said Ileane, “when you hear that our kind father is coming home safe and well.”

“We should rejoice,” replied the sisters, “if our flowers had not withered, our apples had not rotted, and our birds had not stopped singing; but now we have reason to cry.”

When Ileana heard these words she went to her room, saw the flower sprinkled with dew, the bird hungry, and the apple looking as if it wanted to say: “Eat me, little sister!”

So, to help her dear sisters, she gave the flower to one and the bird to the other, keeping only the beautiful apple for herself. So they waited for the arrival of the emperor, who was very stern in his commands.

When the monarch reached home, he approached his oldest daughter and asked for the flower, the bird, and the apple. She showed him nothing but the flower, and even that was half withered. The emperor said nothing, but went to his second daughter. She showed him only the little bird, and that, too, looked drooping. Again the emperor did not speak, but silently went up to his youngest daughter, clever Ileana.

When the emperor saw the apple on Ileana’s chest of drawers he could almost have devoured it with his eyes, it was so beautiful. “Where did you put the flower, and what have you done with the bird?” he asked Ileana.

Ileana did not answer, but hurried to her sisters and brought back a fresh flower and a merry little bird.

“May you prosper, my little daughter,” said the emperor; “I see now that you have kept faith with me.”

From Ileana the emperor went to his second daughter, and then to the eldest one.

When he questioned them about the three things he had trusted to their care, they hastily brought Ileana’s flower, bird, and apple. But as God permits no falsehood to succeed, in their hands the flower withered, the bird moped, and only the apple remained fresh, rosy-cheeked, and eatable.

When the emperor saw this he understood every thing, and ordered the two older princesses to be buried to their breasts in the earth, and left there that they might be an example of the severity of an imperial punishment. But Ileana he praised, kissed, spoke to her in kind, fatherly words, and said: “May you have much happiness, my child, for you have been faithful to your duty.”

After the neighboring emperor's son had recovered, he mounted his horse and set off to ask Ileana to be his wife. The old emperor, Ileana's father, after hearing for what purpose the prince had come, said to him kindly: "Go and ask Ileana, my son and hero; whatever she wishes shall, with God's help, be done."

Ileana said nothing, but permitted the prince to kiss her. The emperor instantly understood the whole matter and said: "My dear children, I see that you ought to be husband and wife; may it prove for your good."

It was not long before Ileana married the bold, handsome, heroic youth. Her wedding was so magnificent that tidings of it spread through seven countries. Yes indeed! But Ileana had not forgotten the evil the prince had in his mind; she knew that he would try some trick upon her the first night after their marriage. So she ordered a sugar doll to be made exactly the same size as she was herself, with face, eyes, lips, and figure precisely like Ileana's. When it was finished, she hid it in the bed where she was to sleep that night.

In the evening, when the relatives and friends had gone to rest and Ileana, too, had been asleep, the prince said to his bride:

"Dear Ileana, wait a little while, I'll come back directly." Then he left the room.

Ileana did not hesitate long, but jumped out of bed, left the sugar doll in her place, and hid behind a curtain at the head of the bed.

She had scarcely concealed herself, when the prince returned to the chamber with a sharp sword in his hand.

"Tell me now, my dear Ileana," he said, "did you throw me into the cellar?"

"Yes," said Ileana, behind the curtain. The prince dealt one blow with the sword on the doll's breast.

"Did you drive me out of the country with scorn and mockery?" he asked again.

"Yes," said Ileana.

The prince cut the doll across her face.

“Did you empty my dishes of food?” asked the prince the third time.

“Yes,” said Ileana.

The prince slashed the doll from head to foot.

“Did you pour out my wine?” was the prince’s fourth question.

“Yes,” said Ileana.

The prince cut the figure once across. Ileana began to breathe heavily as if in the agony of death.

“Did you throw me among the knives?” he asked for the fifth and last question.

“Yes,” said Ileana.

The prince now thrust his sword into the figure’s heart, slashed, and hacked it in all directions, with all his strength, till the tears ran down in streams. As dawn approached he began to sob bitterly. Suddenly a bit of sugar popped into his mouth.

“Ah, Ileana! you were sweet in life, and remain sweet even in death,” he said, weeping still more violently.

“Sweet indeed,” said Ileana, coming out from behind the curtain, “but from this hour forth I will be a hundred thousand times sweeter.”

The prince seemed fairly petrified with delight, when he saw Ileana safe and well. He clasped her in his arms, and for many years they lived joyously and ruled the land in peace and happiness.

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