



Ivan Kruchina

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Russian

Easy
15 min read

Kruchina was a wealthy merchant, and had a son who was called Ivanushka. The mother of Ivanushka died, and the merchant Kruchina married a second wife. Ivanushka was sent to a day-school; he used to remain there all day, and return home in the evening. During holidays the boy stayed at home and amused himself as he best could.

Business compelled the merchant to travel into foreign countries. The second wife was young, the merchant old and grey-haired. As soon as the merchant had left home visitors began to arrive, who sat down at table, ate, drank, and enjoyed themselves.

“Mother, who are these people?” asked Ivanushka.

“They are all my relations,” answered the stepmother.

“Very good,” whispered Ivanushka softly to himself. “As soon as father comes home I will tell him all about this.”

The merchant’s wife had a favourite housekeeper, who knew how to get at other people’s secrets. Having overheard what Ivanushka had said, she told her mistress of it.

In the merchant’s stable was a stray foal, and Ivanushka attended to it: he used to feed it, lead it to water, and clean it. The foal grew up, and became in time a fine, strong horse; he could neigh in various voices, speak like

a man, and understood what was said to him. One day, Ivanushka, returning home from school, and passing by the stable, observed that the horse, full of trouble, stood with his head hanging down and his ears drooping.

“Why are you so sad?” asked Ivanushka. “Is there mischief brewing for you or for me?”

“I am sorry on your account—not my own,” answered the horse. “Your stepmother means to poison you with some wine. Take care you don’t drink it, but pour it away.”

Ivanushka went in. His stepmother asked him to take a glass of wine, but he declined; she then began to press him so strongly that he could not possibly refuse her. He took up the glass, approached a window, and pretending to drink the wine, emptied the glass unobserved outside. There was grass growing under the window, and the poison burnt it to the very root. The stepmother was amazed that nothing happened to Ivanushka.

Next day, on his way home, Ivanushka again passed by the stable door. He went in to caress the horse, and observed that, like the day before, the horse was sad, and stood with his head hanging down. He asked the reason, and the horse said,—

“They have baked a poisoned cake for you; take care not to eat it, but throw it away.”

It happened exactly as the horse had foretold. Ivanushka threw the cake out of the window, and a dog ate it. In an instant he began to run round and round, and to run his head against the walls; at last he threw himself upon the ground, barked, howled, and died. Ivanushka, as well as ever, went next morning to school.

When the housekeeper found out that it was the horse who had warned Ivanushka, she determined with the consent of the merchant’s wife to destroy him; and accordingly she put some poison into a pail of water. If the horse would but drink it, thirty-three carrion crows would come and with their iron beaks tear him into pieces.

The servants led the horse to water. Suddenly he broke loose, and rushed to the gate; but it was shut. The servants ran after him, put a bit into his mouth, fastened a rope round his neck and ears, and then began dragging him. The merchant’s wife looked out of the window and screamed, “Hold him! Drag him along!”

The horse, however, kicked so violently that they were obliged to let him go.

At that moment Ivanushka came home from school. He could not bear to see the horse so cruelly treated, and said to the servants,—

“Why do you torment the poor beast?”

“We are taking him to water,” they answered.

“I will water him myself,” said Ivanushka. He then went to the well, drew out some fresh water and gave it to the horse.

The merchant’s wife, seeing that she could neither destroy Ivanushka nor the horse, became very angry and pretended to be ill.

When the merchant returned home he found his wife groaning in bed.

“I fear you are ill, my love,” said the merchant.

“Very ill.”

“Has the doctor been?”

“Yes; he says it will be necessary to kill the horse, take out its gall, and use it for my medicine.”

“Certainly,” said the merchant; “we will do so. We can easily buy another.” And he ordered the horse to be killed.

The servants began to sharpen their knives. When Ivanushka came from school, and heard that they were going to kill the horse, he went at once to his father, and said,—

“Father, permit me for the last time to feed the horse, and to lead him about the yard.”

The merchant gave his permission. Ivanushka fed the horse with barley; then he took him by the bridle, and led him into the yard. Ivanushka looked at the horse and shed bitter tears.

All of a sudden the horse kicked Ivanushka; the boy fell down, but quickly sprang up again.

“Has your strength increased?” asked the horse.

“Yes, it has.”

The horse again kicked him, and asked, “Has it still increased?”

“I feel very strong indeed,” answered Ivan. “I should like very much to try my strength on somebody.”

“Ask your father to let you ride me on the road for the last time, and to enjoy yourself.”

Ivan went to his father.

“Father,” he said, “allow me to ride on the horse for the last time, and to enjoy myself.”

The merchant gave his consent. Ivan saddled the horse, mounted him, rode outside the gates, and began to gallop up and down. The merchant stood at the gate looking on.

All at once Ivan whistled, stopped the horse, and said,—

“Farewell, my dear father; I cannot stop with you any longer; stepmother tried to poison me and the horse.”

Having said this he galloped away.

Outside the town Ivan met an old, withered, bony woman driving a cart full of hay on the road. Presently the cart turned over. Ivan laughed, and cried,—

“I say, grandmother, I could lift up your cart with one hand.”

He dismounted, and began to lift up the cart.

“Have you left your home with a blessing?” asked the old woman, and taking a scythe from under the hay, she mowed him down.

“A-ha! though you have been bragging of your strength, I have got you now.”

The old woman was Death.

The poor youth fell down dead; the horse, frightened, galloped away. A falcon flew by carrying two phials in its claws,—one of the water of life, the other of the water of death. He had observed carrion birds in the middle of the field feeding on white flesh; they were rapidly devouring poor Ivan. The falcon was moved with compassion. Descending to the ground, he poured a few drops of the water of death into Ivan’s mouth, and the

flesh became whole again; then he sprinkled him with the water of life, and Ivan got up, thinking he was awakened from a long sleep.

“Without my assistance,” said the falcon, “you would have slept long enough.”

At first Ivan would not believe this. The falcon seized a sparrow, struck it with his wing and threw it on the ground. Then he sprinkled it with the water of life, and the sparrow flew away.

“It is as you say. I thank you, bright falcon, for your kind help. But where is my horse?”

“Your horse is in a certain kingdom far away. He lives in a town surrounded by marble walls with crystal gates.”

“Oh, falcon, falcon! show me the way to my horse.”

“Go in the direction in which you will see me fly.”

A story is soon told; but it was a long time before Ivan arrived at the city with marble walls and crystal gates. The walls were high and the guards would not let Ivan pass through the gates. As soon as his horse scented him he began to neigh and to tear himself from his keepers. He kicked the wall, and knocked such an enormous stone out of it that the inhabitants could not possibly replace it. He was, however, seized, shut up in a cellar built of white stones, and fastened with iron hoops. Ivan passed through the broken wall into the city. The people looked at him, and said,—

“He is a stranger from some foreign country.”

They took him before their czar.

“Who are you?” asked the czar.

“I don’t know.”

“Where do you come from?”

“I don’t know.”

Ivan gave the same answer to all the questions they put to him: “I don’t know.”

The czar was angry at first, but after a little thought he arrived at the conclusion that Ivan only feigned to be a

simpleton, and might be made useful. "Remain then unknown," said the czar to Ivan, and retained him in his service. Ivan served him faithfully; the czar gave him the keys of his treasury, with permission to enter six rooms but not a seventh.

Ivan was often in the treasury. One day, full of thought, he approached the seventh room. Suddenly he heard the neighing of a horse. He could not restrain himself; he opened the door locked with seven locks, and there at once perceived his own long lost horse. The horse was bound with twelve iron hoops and fastened to a pillar with chains; on the pillar were hanging the keys of the chains.

"I did not expect to see you again," said the horse. "I have helped you before; help me now. Let me out that I may stretch my legs."

Ivan took down the keys, unlocked the chains, and freed the horse.

"I would not allow any one here to mount me," said the horse. "Now make haste, put on saddle and bridle, and get on my back. Take one of the gloves and the brush from the wall. They will be useful to you."

Ivan took the glove and the brush from the hook, mounted the horse, shook the silken reins, and the horse rushed out like an arrow, the sparks flying from beneath his hoofs. He cleared the crystal gates at a bound.

After a little while the horse said to Ivan, "Get down on the ground and hearken if they are pursuing us. The czar has a wind-horse, as swift as lightning; he is sure to overtake us."

Ivan put his ear to the ground and listened.

"They are pursuing us!" he cried.

"Throw the glove down behind you."

Ivan threw down the glove, and there arose from the ground a dense, dark forest, which stopped the way. Ivan rode on.

Meanwhile the people cut down the forest and began again to pursue Ivan.

"Throw the brush down behind you."

Ivan threw it down, and there arose behind them steep rocky mountains, which sheltered Ivan as with a wall.

After some time Ivan reached another kingdom. Having entered a beautiful field, he let the horse loose to graze, and said,—

“My faithful friend and companion, come to me again at the sound of my whistle.”

He then went into a garden which was not far off. In that garden, behind silver bars, stood an apple tree full of beautiful fruit. Ivan was tempted, and plucked one of the finest of them. But to that apple tree were fastened golden wires, and as soon as Ivan had plucked the apple, bells began to ring. The servants rushed into the garden, seized Ivan, and took him to their czar.

The czar asked Ivan for his name and country, and whether he left it of his own free will. He was pleased with Ivan’s simplicity, took him into his own service, and ordered him to look after the garden. He nicknamed him Ivan the Unknown.

The czar had three daughters, two of whom were already married. One day the maiden princess, who was exceedingly beautiful, came into the garden, and seeing a young handsome gardener there, she said to him,—

“How is it, gardener, that you have not brought me any flowers yet?”

Ivan began immediately to pluck some of the finest flowers. While doing so, a thorn pricked his hand, and the wound bled. At the sight of the blood the princess was moved with pity. She took her own silk handkerchief, and bound the gardener’s hand with it.

Now about this time news came that a neighbouring infidel king had declared war against the czar, and had advanced towards the capital with a powerful army. A great battle began.

Ivan cut down a lime tree, made a stout beam of it, went into the fields, and whistled and called loudly for his horse. In an instant his beautiful horse appeared. The earth shook as he galloped. Ivan mounted him and rushed against the enemy. He seized from one a sword, from another a golden helmet, put the helmet on his head and drew down the visor. He then fought and defeated the whole army.

The czar was amazed, and wondered who the knight could be, and whence he came. He did not suppose, even for a moment, that the knight was his own gardener. The people thought he was perhaps St. George himself on

his white horse. The enemy was dispersed, and had left their baggage behind them. The strange knight galloped away, and was seen no more.

The czar returned home, and praising the unknown knight's bravery, said to his daughter,—“Whoever he may be, I would willingly give you to him for a wife as a reward of such valour.”

The gardener stood beneath the window and heard it.

Not long afterwards another hostile army advanced against the capital, and again a frightful battle began.

Ivan went into the fields and whistled; the horse galloped to him, and the dust from beneath his feet arose like smoke in the air. The horse was full of life and vigour.

“What is it you want?” asked the horse.

“Help me once more,” said Ivan; “take me to the battle-field.”

The horse flew with the swiftness of the wind, and the young knight, like an eagle, attacked the forces of the enemy, and routed them. The people again thought it was St. George. Ivan brandished his lance, and killed numbers of the enemy; he delivered the czar from death, and the people from slavery. The foe fled and never returned.

The czar ordered the unknown knight to be invited to his castle. The stranger appeared. The czar begged him to lift up his visor. When the princess saw her own handkerchief on the knight's arm, she blushed, but said not a word.

“Whoever you may be,” said the czar, “I will keep my czar's word with you: if you are unmarried, I will give you my daughter for a wife; if married, you shall have half of my kingdom.”

Ivan drew up the visor of his golden helmet and bowed humbly to the czar. The surprised czar recognised in the knight his own gardener. Soon afterwards Ivan married the princess.

And now we have told you, in the old fashion, the story of Ivan, the son of the merchant Kruchina.

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