

Ivan the Fool and St. Peter's Fife

Robert Nisbet Bain

Ukrainian

Advanced
12 min read

There was once upon a time a man who had three sons, and two were clever, but the third, called Ivan, was a fool. Their father divided all his goods among them and died, and the three brothers went out into the world to seek their fortunes. Now the two wise brothers left all their goods at home, but Ivan the fool, who had only inherited a large millstone, took it along with him. They went on and on and on till it began to grow dark, when they came to a large forest. Then the wise brothers said, "Let us climb up to the top of this oak and pass the night there, and then robbers will not fall upon us."—"But what will this silly donkey do with his millstone?" asked one of them.—"You look to yourselves," said Ivan, "for I mean to pass the night in this tree also." Then the wise brothers climbed to the very tip-top of the tree and there sat down, and then Ivan dragged himself up too, and the millstone after him.

He tried to get up as high as his brothers, but the thin boughs broke beneath him, so he had to be content with staying in the lower part of the tree on the thicker boughs; so there he sat, hugging the millstone in his arms. Presently some robbers came along that way, red-handed from their work, and they too prepared to pass the night under the tree. So they cut them down firewood, and made them a roaring fire beneath a huge cauldron, and in this cauldron they began to boil their supper. They boiled and boiled till their mess of pottage was ready, and then they all sat down round the cauldron and took out their large ladles, and were just about to fall to—in fact they were blowing their food because it was so boiling hot—when Ivan let his big millstone plump down into the middle of the cauldron, so that the pottage flew right into their eyes. The robbers were so terrified that they all sprang to their feet straightway and scampered off through the forest, forgetting all the booty of which

they had robbed the merchantmen.

Then Ivan came down from the oak and cried to his brothers, "You come down here and divide the spoil!" So the wise brothers came down, put all the merchandise on the backs of the robbers' horses, and went home with it; but the only thing that Ivan was able to secure for himself was a bag of incense. This he immediately took to the nearest churchyard, placed it on the top of a tomb, and began to pound away at it with his millstone. Suddenly St Peter appeared to him and said, "What art thou doing, good man?"—"I am pounding up this incense to make bread of it."—"Nay, good man, I will advise thee better: give me the incense and take from me whatever thou wilt."—"Very well, St Peter," said the fool; "thou must give me a little fife, but a fife of such a sort that whenever I play upon it, every one will be obliged to dance."—"But dost thou know how to play upon a fife?"—"No, but I can soon learn."

Then St Peter drew forth a little fife from his bosom and gave it to him, and took away the incense, and who can say where he went with it? But Ivan stood up and gazed at the sky and said, "Look now! if St Peter hath not already burnt my incense and made of it that large white cloud that is sailing above my head!" Then he took up his fife and began to play, and the moment he began to play, everything around him began to dance; the wolves, and the hares, and the foxes, and the bears, nay, the very birds lit down upon the ground and began to dance, and Ivan went on laughing and playing all the time.

Even the savage, surly bears danced and danced till their legs tottered beneath them. Then they clutched tight hold of the trees to stop themselves from dancing; but it was of no use, dance they must. At last Ivan himself was tired, and lay down to rest, and when he had rested a little, he got up again and went on into the town. There all the people were in the bazaars, buying and selling. Some were buying pancakes, others baskets of bright-coloured eggs, others again pitchers of kvas.

Ivan began playing on his fife, and forthwith they all fell a-dancing. One man who had a whole basket of eggs on his head danced them into bits, and danced and danced till he looked like the yolk of an egg himself. Those who were asleep got up and gave themselves up to dancing straightway; there were some who danced without trousers, and some who danced without smocks or shirts, and there were some who danced with nothing on at all, for dance they must when Ivan began a-playing. The whole town was turned upside down: the dogs, the swine, the cocks and hens, everything that had life came out and danced. At last Ivan was tired, so he left off

playing and went into the town to seek service.

The parson there took a fancy to him, and said to him, "Good man! wilt enter my service?"—"That will I, gladly," said Ivan.—"How much wages dost thou want by the year then?"—"It won't come dear; five karbovantsya (coins) are all I ask."—"Good, I agree," said the parson. So he engaged Ivan as his servant, and the next day he sent him out into the fields to tend his cattle. Ivan drove the cattle into the pastures, but he himself perched on the top of a haystack while the cattle grazed. He sat there, and sat and sat till he grew quite dull, and then he said to himself, "I'll play a bit on my fife, I haven't played for a long time."

So he began to play, and immediately all the cattle fell a-dancing; and not only the cattle, but all the foxes, and the hares, and the wolves, and everything in the hedges and ditches fell a-dancing too. They danced and danced till the poor cattle were clean worn out and at the last gasp. In the evening Ivan drove them home, but they were so famished that they tugged at the dirty straw roofs of the huts they passed, and so got a chance mouthful or two. But Ivan went in and had supper and a comfortable night's rest afterward. The next day he again drove the cattle into the pastures. They began grazing till he took out his fife again, when they all fell a-dancing like mad. He played on and on till evening, when he drove the cattle home again, and they were all as hungry as could be, and wearied to death from dancing.

Now the parson was not a little astonished when he saw his cattle. "Where on earth has he been feeding them?" thought he; "they are quite tired out and almost famished! I'll take care to go myself to-morrow, and see exactly whither he takes them, and what he does with them." On the third day the neat-herd again drove the cattle into the pastures, but this time the parson followed after them, and went and hid himself behind the hedge near to which Ivan was watching the cattle graze. There he sat then, and watched to see what the man would do.

Presently Ivan mounted on to the haystack and began to play. And immediately all the cattle fell a-dancing, and everything in the hedge, and the parson behind the hedge danced too. Now the hedge was a quickset hedge, and as the parson began capering about in it, he tore to shreds his cassock and his breeches, and his under-coat, and his shirt, and scratched his skin and wrenched out his beard as if he had been very badly shaved, and still the poor parson had to go on dancing in the midst of the prickly hedge till there were great weals and wounds all over his body, and the red blood began to flow.

Then the parson saw he was in evil case, and shrieked to his herdsman to leave off playing; but the herdsman

was so wrapped up in his music that he did not hear him; but at last he looked in the direction of the hedge, and when he saw the poor parson skipping about like a lunatic, he stopped. The parson darted away as fast as his legs could carry him toward the village, and oh! what a sight he looked as he dashed through the streets! The people didn't know him, and--scandalized that anybody should run about in rags and tatters so that his whole body could be seen--began to hoot him. Then the poor man turned aside from the public road, crawled off through the woods, and dashed off through the tall reeds of the gardens, with the dogs after him.

For wherever he went they took him for a robber, and hounded on the dogs. At last the parson got home, all rags and tatters, so that when his wife saw him she did not know him, but called to the labourers, "Help, help! here's a robber, turn him out!" They came rushing up with sticks and cudgels, but he began talking to them, and at last they recognized him, led him home, and he told his wife all about Ivan. The parson's wife was so amazed she could scarce believe it. In the evening Ivan drove home the oxen, put them into their stalls, gave them straw to eat, and then came into the house himself to have supper. He came into the house, and the parson said to him, "Come now, Ivan, when thou hast rested a bit, play my wife a little song!"

But as for the parson, he took good care to tie himself first of all to the pillar which held up the roof of the house. Ivan sat down on the ground near to the threshold and began to play. The parson's wife sat down on the bench to listen to him while he played; but immediately she leaped up from the bench and began to dance, and she danced with such hearty good-will that the place became too small for her. Then the Devil seemed to take possession of the cat too, for pussy leaped from under the stove and began to spring and bound about also. The parson held on and held on to the pillar with all his might, but it was of no use.

He had no power to resist; he let go with his hands, and tugged and tugged till the rope that held him grew slacker and slacker, and then he went dancing round and round the pillar at a furious rate, with the rope chafing his hands and feet all the time. At last he could endure it no longer, and bawled to Ivan to stop. "The deuce is in thee!" cried he. Then Ivan stopped playing, put his fife into his breast-pocket, and went and lay down to sleep. But the parson said to his wife, "We must turn away this Ivan to-morrow, for he will be the death of ourselves and our cattle!" Ivan, however, overheard what the parson said to his wife, and getting up early in the morning, he went straight to the parson, and said to him, "Give me one hundred karbovantsya, and I'll be off; but if you won't give them to me, I'll play and play till you and your wife have danced yourselves to death, and then I'll take your place and live at mine ease." The parson scratched himself behind the ears and

hesitated; but at last he thought he had better give the money and be quit of him. So he took the hundred karbovantsya out of his satchel and gave them to Ivan.

Then Ivan played them a parting song, till the parson and his wife fell down to the ground, dead-beat, with their tongues lolling out of their mouths; and then he put his fife into his breast-pocket, and wandered forth into the wide world.

Read more fairy tales on Fairytalez.com