

Ivanoushka the Simpleton

Folk Tales From The Russian

Russian

Intermediate

29 min read

In a kingdom far away from our country, there was a town over which ruled the Tsar Pea with his Tsaritzza Carrot. He had many wise statesmen, wealthy princes, strong, powerful warriors, and also simple soldiers, a hundred thousand, less one man. In that town lived all kinds of people: honest, bearded merchants, keen and open-handed rascals, German tradesmen, lovely maidens, Russian drunkards; and in the suburbs all around, the peasants tilled the soil, sowed the wheat, ground the flour, traded in the markets, and spent the money in drink.

In one of the suburbs there was a poor hut where an old man lived with his three sons, Thomas, Pakhom, and Ivan. The old man was not only clever, he was wise. He had happened once to have a chat with the devil. They talked together while the old man treated him to a tumbler of wine and got out of the devil many great secrets. Soon after this the peasant began to perform such marvelous acts that the neighbors called him a sorcerer, a magician, and even supposed that the devil was his kin.

Yes, it is true that the old man performed great marvels. Were you longing for love, go to him, bow to the old man, and he would give you some strange root, and the sweetheart would be yours. If there is a theft, again to him with the tale. The old man conjures over some water, takes an officer along straight to the thief, and your lost is found; only take care that the officer steals it not.

Indeed the old man was very wise; but his children were not his equals. Two of them were almost as clever.

They were married and had children, but Ivan, the youngest, was single. No one cared much for him because he was rather a fool, could not count one, two, three, and only drank, or ate, or slept, or lay around. Why care for such a person? Every one knows life for some is brighter than for others. But Ivan was good-hearted and quiet. Ask of him a belt, he will give a kaftan also; take his mittens, he certainly would want to have you take his cap with them. And that is why all liked Ivan, and usually called him Ivanoushka the Simpleton; though the name means fool, at the same time it carries the idea of a kind heart.

Our old man lived on with his sons until finally his hour came to die. He called his three sons and said to them:

“Dear children of mine, my dying hour is at hand and ye must fulfill my will. Every one of you come to my grave and spend one night with me; thou, Tom, the first night; thou, Pakhom, the second night; and thou, Ivanoushka the Simpleton, the third.”

Two of the brothers, as clever people, promised their father to do according to his bidding, but the Simpleton did not even promise; he only scratched his head.

The old man died and was buried. During the celebration the family and guests had plenty of pancakes to eat and plenty of whisky to wash them down.

Now you remember that on the first night Thomas was to go to the grave; but he was too lazy, or possibly afraid, so he said to the Simpleton:

“I must be up very early to-morrow morning; I have to thresh; go thou for me to our father’s grave.”

“All right,” answered Ivanoushka the Simpleton. He took a slice of black rye bread, went to the grave, stretched himself out, and soon began to snore.

The church clock struck midnight; the wind roared, the owl cried in the trees, the grave opened and the old man came out and asked:

“Who is there?”

“I,” answered Ivanoushka.

“Well, my dear son, I will reward thee for thine obedience,” said the father.

Lo! the cocks crowed and the old man dropped into the grave. The Simpleton arrived home and went to the

warm stove.

“What happened?” asked the brothers.

“Nothing,” he answered. “I slept the whole night and am hungry now.”

The second night it was Pakhom’s turn to go to his father’s grave. He thought it over and said to the Simpleton:

“To-morrow is a busy day with me. Go in my place to our father’s grave.”

“All right,” answered Ivanoushka. He took along with him a piece of fish pie, went to the grave and slept.

Midnight approached, the wind roared, crows came flying, the grave opened and the old man came out.

“Who is there?” he asked.

“I,” answered his son the Simpleton.

“Well, my beloved son, I will not forget thine obedience,” said the old man.

The cocks crowed and the old man dropped into his grave. Ivanoushka the Simpleton came home, went to sleep on the warm stove, and in the morning his brothers asked:

“What happened?”

“Nothing,” answered Ivanoushka.

On the third night the brothers said to Ivan the Simpleton:

“It is thy turn to go to the grave of our father. The father’s will should be done.”

“All right,” answered Ivanoushka. He took some cookies, put on his sheepskin, and arrived at the grave.

At midnight his father came out.

“Who is there?” he asked.

“I,” answered Ivanoushka.

“Well,” said the old father, “my obedient son, thou shalt be rewarded;” and the old man shouted with a mighty voice:

“Arise, bay horse—thou wind-swift steed,

Appear before me in my need;

Stand up as in the storm the weed!”

And lo!—Ivanoushka the Simpleton beheld a horse running, the earth trembling under his hoofs, his eyes like stars, and out of his mouth and ears smoke coming in a cloud. The horse approached and stood before the old man.

“What is thy wish?” he asked with a man’s voice.

The old man crawled into his left ear, washed and adorned himself, and jumped out of his right ear as a young, brave fellow never seen before.

“Now listen attentively,” he said. “To thee, my son, I give this horse. And thou, my faithful horse and friend, serve my son as thou hast served me.”

Hardly had the old man pronounced these words when the first cock crew and the sorcerer dropped into his grave. Our Simpleton went quietly back home, stretched himself under the icons, and his snoring was heard far around.

“What happened?” the brothers again asked.

But the Simpleton did not even answer; he only waved his hand. The three brothers continued to live their usual life, the two with cleverness and the younger with foolishness. They lived a day in and an equal day out. But one morning there came quite a different day from all others. They learned that big men were going all over the country with trumpets and players; that those men announced everywhere the will of the Tsar, and the Tsar’s will was this: The Tsar Pea and the Tsaritzza Carrot had an only daughter, the Tsarevna Baktriana, heiress to the throne. She was such a beautiful maiden that the sun blushed when she looked at it, and the moon, altogether too bashful, covered itself from her eyes. Tsar and Tsaritzza had a hard time to decide to whom they should give their daughter for a wife. It must be a man who could be a proper ruler over the country, a brave

warrior on the battlefield, a wise judge in the council, an adviser to the Tsar, and a suitable heir after his death. They also wanted a bridegroom who was young, brave, and handsome, and they wanted him to be in love with their Tsarevna. That would have been easy enough, but the trouble was that the beautiful Tsarevna loved no one. Sometimes the Tsar mentioned to her this or that one. Always the same answer, "I do not love him." The Tsaritzza tried, too, with no better result; "I do not like him."

A day came when the Tsar Pea and his Tsaritzza Carrot seriously addressed their daughter on the subject of marriage and said:

"Our beloved child, our very beautiful Tsarevna Baktriana, it is time for thee to choose a bridegroom. Envoys of all descriptions, from kings and tzars and princes, have worn our threshold, drunk dry all the cellars, and thou hast not yet found any one according to thy heart's wish."

The Tsarevna answered: "Sovereign, and thou, Tsaritzza, my dear mother, I feel sorry for you, and my wish is to obey your desire. So let fate decide who is destined to become my husband. I ask you to build a hall, a high hall with thirty-two circles, and above those circles a window. I will sit at that window and do you order all kinds of people, tsars, kings, tsarovitchi, korolevitchi, brave warriors, and handsome fellows, to come. The one who will jump through the thirty-two circles, reach my window and exchange with me golden rings, he it will be who is destined to become my husband, son and heir to you."

The Tsar and Tsaritzza listened attentively to the words of their bright Tsarevna, and finally they said: "According to thy wish shall it be done."

In no time the hall was ready, a very high hall adorned with Venetian velvets, with pearls for tassels, with golden designs, and thirty-two circles on both sides of the window high above. Envoys went to the different kings and sovereigns, pigeons flew with orders to the subjects to gather the proud and the humble into the town of the Tsar Pea and his Tsaritzza Carrot. It was announced everywhere that the one who could jump through the circles, reach the window and exchange golden rings with the Tsarevna Baktriana, that man would be the lucky one, notwithstanding his rank—tsar or free kosack, king or warrior, tsarevitch, korolevitch, or fellow without any kinfolk or country.

The great day arrived. Crowds pressed to the field where stood the newly built hall, brilliant as a star. Up high at the window the tsarevna was sitting, adorned with precious stones, clad in velvet and pearls. The people below were roaring like an ocean. The Tzar with his Tzaritzza was sitting upon a throne. Around them were

boyars, warriors, and counselors.

The suitors on horseback, proud, handsome, and brave, whistle and ride round about, but looking at the high window their hearts drop. There were already several fellows who had tried. Each would take a long start, balance himself, spring, and fall back like a stone, a laughing stock for the witnesses.

The brothers of Ivanoushka the Simpleton were preparing themselves to go to the field also.

The Simpleton said to them: "Take me along with you."

"Thou fool," laughed the brothers; "stay at home and watch the chickens."

"All right," he answered, went to the chicken yard and lay down. But as soon as the brothers were away, our Ivanoushka the Simpleton walked to the wide fields and shouted with a mighty voice:

"Arise, bay horse—thou wind-swift steed,

Appear before me in my need;

Stand up as in the storm the weed!"

The glorious horse came running. Flames shone out of his eyes; out of his nostrils smoke came in clouds, and the horse asked with a man's voice:

"What is thy wish?"

Ivanoushka the Simpleton crawled into the horse's left ear, transformed himself and reappeared at the right ear, such a handsome fellow that in no book is there written any description of him; no one has ever seen such a fellow. He jumped onto the horse and touched his iron sides with a silk whip. The horse became impatient, lifted himself above the ground, higher and higher above the dark woods below the traveling clouds. He swam over the large rivers, jumped over the small ones, as well as over hills and mountains. Ivanoushka the Simpleton arrived at the hall of the Tsarevna Baktriana, flew up like a hawk, passed through thirty circles, could not reach the last two, and went away like a whirlwind.

The people were shouting: "Take hold of him! take hold of him!" The Tsar jumped to his feet, the Tsaritzza screamed. Every one was roaring in amazement.

The brothers of Ivanoushka came home and there was but one subject of conversation—what a splendid fellow they had seen! What a wonderful start to pass through the thirty circles!

“Brothers, that fellow was I,” said Ivanoushka the Simpleton, who had long since arrived.

“Keep still and do not fool us,” answered the brothers.

The next day the two brothers were going again to the tsarski show and Ivanoushka the Simpleton said again:

“Take me along with you.”

“For thee, fool, this is thy place. Be quiet at home and scare sparrows from the pea field instead of the scarecrow.”

“All right,” answered the Simpleton, and he went to the field and began to scare the sparrows. But as soon as the brothers left home, Ivanoushka started to the wide field and shouted out loud with a mighty voice:

“Arise, bay horse—thou wind-swift steed,

Appear before me in my need;

Stand up as in the storm the weed!”

—and here came the horse, the earth trembling under his hoofs, the sparks flying around, his eyes like flames, and out of his nostrils smoke curling up.

“For what dost thou wish me?”

Ivanoushka the Simpleton crawled into the left ear of the horse, and when he appeared out of the right ear, oh, my! what a fellow he was! Even in fairy tales there are never such handsome fellows, to say nothing of everyday life.

Ivanoushka lifted himself on the iron back of his horse and touched him with a strong whip. The noble horse grew angry, made a jump, and went higher than the dark woods, a little below the traveling clouds. One jump, one mile is behind; a second jump, a river is behind; and a third jump and they were at the hall. Then the horse, with Ivanoushka on his back, flew like an eagle, high up into the air, passed the thirty-first circle, failed to reach the last one, and swept away like the wind.

The people shouted: "Take hold of him! take hold of him!" The Tsar jumped to his feet, the Tsaritzza screamed, the princes and boyars opened their mouths.

The brothers of Ivanoushka the Simpleton came home. They were wondering at the fellow. Yes, an amazing fellow indeed! one circle only was unreached.

"Brothers, that fellow over there was I," said Ivanoushka to them.

"Keep still in thy own place, thou fool," was their sneering answer.

The third day the brothers were going again to the strange entertainment of the Tsar, and again Ivanoushka the Simpleton said to them: "Take me along with you."

"Fool," they laughed, "there is food to be given to the hogs; better go to them."

"All right," the younger brother answered, and quietly went to the back yard and gave food to the hogs. But as soon as his brothers had left home our Ivanoushka the Simpleton hurried to the wide field and shouted out loud:

"Arise, bay horse—them wind-swift steed,

Appear before me in my need;

Stand up as in the storm the weed!"

At once the horse came running, the earth trembled; where he stepped there appeared ponds, where his hoofs touched there were lakes, out of his eyes shone flames, out of his ears smoke came like a cloud.

"For what dost thou wish me?" the horse asked with a man's voice.

Ivanoushka the Simpleton crawled into his right ear and jumped out of his left one, and a handsome fellow he

was. A young girl could not even imagine such a one.

Ivanoushka struck his horse, pulled the bridle tight, and lo! he flew high up in the air. The wind was left behind and even the swallow, the sweet, winged passenger, must not aspire to do the same. Our hero flew like a cloud high up into the sky, his silver-chained mail rattling, his fair curls floating in the wind. He arrived at the Tsarevna's high hall, struck his horse once more, and oh! how the wild horse did jump!

Look there! the fellow reaches all the circles; he is near the window; he presses the beautiful Tsarevna with his strong arms, kisses her on the sugar lips, exchanges golden rings, and like a storm sweeps through the fields. There, there, he is crushing every one on his way! And the Tsarevna? Well, she did not object. She even adorned his forehead with a diamond star.

The people roared: "Take hold of him!" But the fellow had already disappeared and no traces were left behind.

The Tsar Pea lost his royal dignity. The Tsaritzza Carrot screamed louder than ever and the wise counselors only shook their wise heads and remained silent.

The brothers came home talking and discussing the wonderful matter.

"Indeed," they shook their heads; "only think of it! The fellow succeeded and our Tsarevna has a bridegroom. But who is he? Where is he?"

"Brothers, the fellow is I," said Ivanoushka the Simpleton, smiling.

"Keep still, I and I—," and the brothers almost slapped him.

The matter proved to be quite serious this time, and the Tsar and Tsaritzza issued an order to surround the town with armed men whose duty it was to let every one enter, but not a soul go out. Every one had to appear at the royal palace and show his forehead. From early in the morning the crowds were gathering around the palace. Each forehead was inspected, but there was no star on any. Dinner time was approaching and in the palace they even forgot to cover the oak tables with white spreads. The brothers of Ivanoushka had also to show their foreheads and the Simpleton said to them:

"Take me along with you."

"Thy place is right here," they answered, jokingly. "But say, what is the matter with thy head that thou hast

covered it with cloths? Did somebody strike thee?”

“No, nobody struck me. I, myself, struck the door with my forehead. The door remained all right, but on my forehead there is a knob.”

The brothers laughed and went. Soon after them Ivanoushka left home and went straight to the window of the Tsarevna, where she sat leaning on the window sill and looking for her betrothed.

“There is our man,” shouted the guards, when the Simpleton appeared among them. “Show thy forehead. Hast thou the star?” and they laughed.

Ivanoushka the Simpleton gave no heed to their bidding, but refused. The guards were shouting at him and the Tsarevna heard the noise and ordered the fellow to her presence. There was nothing to be done but to take off the cloths.

Behold! the star was shining in the middle of his forehead. The Tsarevna took Ivanoushka by the hand, brought him before Tsar Pea, and said:

“He it is, my Tsar and father, who is destined to become my groom, thy son-in-law and heir.”

It was too late to object. The Tsar ordered preparations for the bridal festivities, and our Ivanoushka the Simpleton was wedded to the Tsarevna Baktriana. The Tsar, the Tsaritzza, the young bride and groom, and their guests, feasted three days. There was fine eating and generous drinking. There were all kinds of amusements also. The brothers of Ivanoushka were created governors and each one received a village and a house.

The story is told in no time, but to live a life requires time and patience. The brothers of Ivanoushka the Simpleton were clever men, we know, and as soon as they became rich every one understood it at once, and they themselves became quite sure about it and began to pride themselves, to boast, and to brag. The humble ones did not dare look toward their homes, and even the boyars had to take off their fur caps on their porches.

Once several boyars came to Tsar Pea and said: “Great Tsar, the brothers of thy son-in-law are bragging around that they know the place where grows an apple tree with silver leaves and golden apples, and they want to bring this apple tree to thee.”

The Tsar immediately called the brothers before him and bade them bring at once the wonderful tree, the apple

tree with silver leaves and golden apples. The brothers had ever so many excuses, but the Tsar would have his way. They were given fine horses out of the royal stables and went on their errand. Our friend, Ivanoushka the Simpleton, found somewhere a lame old horse, jumped on his back facing the tail, and also went. He went to the wide field, grasped the lame horse by the tail, threw him off roughly, and shouted:

“You crows and magpies, come, come! There is lunch prepared for you.”

This done he ordered his horse, his spirited courser, to appear, and as usual he crawled into one ear, jumped out the other ear and they went—where? Toward the east where grew the wonderful apple tree with silver leaves and golden apples. It grew near silver waters upon golden sand. When Ivanoushka reached the place he uprooted the tree and turned toward home. His ride was long and he felt tired. Before he arrived at his town Ivanoushka pitched his tent and lay down for a rest. Along the same road came his brothers. The two were proud no more, but rather depressed, not knowing what answer to give the Tsar. They perceived the tent with silver top and near by the wonderful apple tree. They came nearer and—“There is our Simpleton!” exclaimed the brothers. Then they awakened Ivanoushka and wanted to buy the apple tree. They were rich and offered three carts filled with silver.

“Well, brothers, this tree, this wonderful apple tree, is not for sale,” answered Ivanoushka, “but if you wish to obtain it you may. The price will not be too high, a toe from each right foot.”

The brothers thought the matter over and finally decided to give the desired price. Ivanoushka cut the toes off, gave them the apple tree, and the happy brothers brought it to the Tsar and there was no end to their bragging.

“Here, all-powerful Tsar,” they said. “We went far, and had many a trouble on our way, but thy wish is fulfilled.”

The Tsar Pea seemed pleased, ordered a feast, commanded tunes to be played and drums beaten, rewarded the two brothers of Ivanoushka the Simpleton, each one with a town, and praised them.

The boyars and warriors became furious.

“Why,” they said to the Tsar, “there is nothing wonderful in such an apple tree with golden apples and silver leaves. The brothers of thy son-in-law are bragging around that they will get thee a pig with golden bristles and silver tusks, and not alone the pig, but also her twelve little ones!”

The Tsar called the brothers before him and ordered them to bring the very pig with her golden bristles and

silver tusks and her twelve little ones. The brothers' excuses were not listened to and so they went. Once more the brothers were traveling on a difficult errand, looking for a golden-bristled pig with silver tusks and twelve little pigs.

At that time Ivanoushka the Simpleton made up his mind to take a trip somewhere. He put a saddle on a cow, jumped up on her back facing the tail, and left the town. He came to a field, grasped the cow by the horns, threw her far on the prairie and shouted:

“Come, come, you gray wolves and red foxes! there is a dinner for you!”

Then he ordered his faithful horse, crawled into one ear, and jumped out of the other. Master and courser went on an errand, this time toward the south. One, two, three, and they were in dark woods. In these woods the wished-for pig was walking around, a golden-bristled pig with silver tusks. She was eating roots, and after her followed twelve little pigs.

Ivanoushka the Simpleton threw over the pig a silk rope with a running noose, gathered the little pigs into a basket and went home, but before he reached the town of the Tsar Pea he pitched a tent with a golden top and lay down for a rest. On the same road the brothers came along with gloomy faces, not knowing what to say to the Tsar. They saw the tent, and near by the very pig they were searching for, with golden bristles and silver tusks, was fastened with a silk rope; and in a basket were the twelve little pigs. The brothers looked into the tent. Ivanoushka again! They awakened him and wanted to trade for the pig; they were ready to give in exchange three carts loaded with precious stones.

“Brothers, my pig is not for trade,” said Ivanoushka, “but if you want her so much, well, one finger from each right hand will pay for her.”

The brothers thought over the case for a long while; they reasoned thus: “People live happily without brains, why not without fingers?”

So they allowed Ivanoushka to cut off their fingers, then took the pig to the Tsar, and their bragging had no end.

“Tsar Sovereign,” they said, “we went everywhere, beyond the blue sea, beyond the dark woods; we passed through deep sands, we suffered hunger and thirst; but thy wish is accomplished.”

The Tsar was glad to have such faithful servants. He gave a feast great among feasts, rewarded the brothers of Ivanoushka the Simpleton, created them big boyars and praised them.

The other boyars and different court people said to the Tsar:

“There is nothing wonderful in such a pig. Golden bristles, silver tusks,—yes, it is fine. But a pig remains a pig forever. The brothers of thy son-in-law are bragging now that they will steal for thee out of the stables of the fiery dragon a mare with golden mane and diamond hoofs.”

The Tsar at once called the brothers of Ivanoushka the Simpleton, and ordered the golden-maned mare with the diamond hoofs. The brothers swore that they never said such words, but the Tsar did not listen to their protests.

“Take as much gold as you want, take warriors as many as you wish, but bring me the beautiful mare with golden mane and diamond hoofs. If you do it my reward will be great; if not, your fate is to become peasants as before.”

The brothers went, two sad heroes. Their march was slow; where to go they did not know. Ivanoushka also jumped upon a stick and went leaping toward the field. Once in the wide, open field, he ordered his horse, crawled into one ear, came out of the other, and both started for a far-away country, for an island, a big island. On that island in an iron stable the fiery dragon was watchfully guarding his glory—the golden-maned mare with diamond hoofs, which was locked under seven locks behind seven heavy doors.

Our Ivanoushka journeyed and journeyed, how long we do not know, until at last he arrived at that island, struggled three days with the dragon and killed him on the fourth day. Then he began to tear down the locks. That took three days more. When he had done this he brought out the wonderful mare by the golden mane and turned homeward.

The road was long, and before he reached his town Ivanoushka, according to his habit, pitched his tent with a diamond top, and laid him down for rest. The brothers came along—gloomy they were, fearing the Tsar’s anger. Lo! they heard neighing; the earth trembled—it was the golden-maned mare! Though in the dusk of evening the brothers saw her golden mane shining like fire. They stopped, awakened Ivanoushka the Simpleton, and wanted to trade for the wonderful mare. They were willing to give him a bushel of precious stones each and promised even more.

Ivanoushka said: “Though my mare is not for trade, yet if you want her I’ll give her to you. And you, do you each give me your right ears.”

The brothers did not even argue, but let Ivanoushka cut off their ears, took hold of the bridle and went directly to the Tsar. They presented to him the golden-maned mare with diamond hoofs, and there was no end of bragging.

“We went beyond seas, beyond mountains,” the brothers said to the Tsar; “we fought the fiery dragon who bit off our ears and fingers; we had no fear, but one desire to serve thee faithfully; we shed our blood and lost our wealth.”

The Tsar Pea poured gold over them, created them the very highest men after himself, and planned such a feast that the royal cooks were tired out with cooking to feed all the people, and the cellars were fairly emptied.

The Tsar Pea was sitting on his throne, one brother on his right hand, the other brother on his left hand. The feast was going on; all seemed jolly, all were drinking, all were noisy as bees in a beehive. In the midst of it a young, brave fellow, Ivanoushka the Simpleton, entered the hall—the very fellow who had passed the thirty-two circles and reached the window of the beautiful Tsarevna Baktriana.

When the brothers noticed him, one almost choked himself with wine, the other was suffocating over a piece of swan. They looked at him, opened wide their eyes, and remained silent.

Ivanoushka the Simpleton bowed to his father-in-law and told the story as the story was. He told about the apple tree, the wonderful apple tree with silver leaves and golden apples; he told about the pig, the golden-bristled pig with silver tusks and her twelve little ones; and finally he told about the marvelous mare with a golden mane and diamond hoofs. He finished and laid out ears, fingers, and toes.

“It is the exchange I got,” said Ivanoushka.

Tsar Pea became furious, stamped his feet, ordered the two brothers to be driven away with brooms. One was sent to feed the pigs, another to watch the turkeys. The Tsar seated Ivanoushka beside himself, creating him the highest among the very high.

The feast lasted a very long time until all were tired of feasting.

Ivanoushka took control of the tsarstvo, ruling wisely and severely. After his father-in-law's death he occupied his place. His subjects liked him; he had many children, and his beautiful Tsaritzza Baktriana remained beautiful forever.

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