



*The Muzhichek-As-Big-As-
Your-Thumb-with-
Moustaches-Seven-Versts-
Long.*

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Russian

*Advanced
15 min read*

Note: A verst equals approximately 3,500 feet, and a Muzhichek is a gnome or goblin.

In a certain kingdom, in a certain empire, there once lived a Tsar. At his royal court there was a harness of golden rings. Now it fell out that this Tsar once dreamed that in this harness was fastened a strange horse, not woolly white, but silvery bright, and on its brow a glistening moon. On awaking in the morning the Tsar commanded the public crier to cry abroad that whoever would interpret this dream, and discover this horse, should have his daughter in exchange, and half his tsardom into the bargain.

At this royal proclamation a multitude of princes, boyards, and great lords came together, and thought and thought, but not one of them could interpret the dream, not one of them could discover the horse. At last they hunted up a little withered old grey-beard Muzhichek, and he said to the Tsar, "Thy dream was not a dream,

but real. On just such a horse as thou didst see in thy dream, there came to thee in the night the Muzhichek-as-big-as-your-thumb-with-moustaches-seven-versts-long, and he wants to steal away your lovely little daughter out of the strong fortress.”—“I thank thee, good man, for thy interpretation; and now wilt thou not tell me who can get me this horse?”—“I will tell thee, my Lord Tsar.

I have three sons, mighty men of valour. My wife bore me all three of them in a single night; the eldest in the evening, the second at midnight, the third at dawn of day, and so we called them Zor’ka, Vechorka, and Polunochka. They have not their equals in this realm for strength or valour. Look now, my little father and sovereign lord, send them forth that they may seek this strange horse for thee.”—“Let them go, dear old friend. Let them take as much from my treasury as they need, nor will I go back from my royal word; whichever of them brings me this horse, to him will I give the Tsarevna and half my tsardom.”

The next day, early in the morning, the three brother-heroes, Zor’ka, Vechorka, and Polunochka, arrived at the Tsar’s court; the first had the fairest face, the second the broadest shoulders, the third the stateliest figure. They went in to the Tsar, prayed before the sacred ikons, and bowed low on every side of them, but to the Tsar they bowed lowest of all. “May our Sovereign Lord and Tsar live long in the land! We have come to thee, not to feast with the festive, but to do a deed right hard and sore, for we have come to fetch thee this strange horse from far away—that selfsame horse that appeared to thee in thy dreams.”

—“Success attend you, ye good youths! What provision do ye require for your journey?”—“We want nothing, O Gosudar! Only do not neglect our good father and mother. Provide for them in their old age and need.”—“If that be all, depart in God’s name on your journey. I will bring your old parents to my court, and they shall be my guests; I will give them to eat and drink from my own royal table, they shall be clothed and shod from my own royal wardrobe, and they shall be filled full with all good things.”

So the good youths departed on their long journey. They travelled that day, and the next, and the third also, with nothing but the sky above their heads, and the broad steppe on every side of them. At last they left the steppe and entered a dense forest, and rejoiced greatly. On the very skirts of the forest stood a little hut, and beside the little hut a tiny sheepfold full of sheep.

“Look,” said they, “there we shall find some place to lay our heads in, and rest from our journey.” They knocked at the hut—there was no answer; they peeped into it—it was quite empty. The brothers entered in, made ready for the night, prayed to God, and laid them down to sleep. In the morning Zor’ka and Polunochka went into the

wood to hunt, and said to Vechorka, "Stay at home and get dinner ready for us."

The eldest brother agreed, put everything to rights in the hut, and then went to the sheepfold, chose the fattest ram, cut it up, cleansed it, and roasted it for dinner. He had no sooner laid the table, however, and had just sat down by the window to await his brothers, when all at once there came a rumbling and a thundering from the forest, the door was nearly torn off its hinges, and the Muzhichek-only-as-big-as-your-thumb-but-with-moustaches-seven-versts-long entered the hut, with his moustaches floating far down his back.

On entering the hut he looked at Vechorka from beneath his beetling brows, and shrieked with a terrible voice, "How dare you come into my hut as if you were its lord and master? How dare you cut up my ram?" But Vechorka looked at him and smiled.

"You ought to grow a little bigger before you shriek like that," said he. "Be off, and don't let me see you here again, or I'll take a spoonful of cabbage soup, and a little crumb of bread, and glue up your eyes for you." The Muzhichek-no-bigger-than-your-thumb-but-with-moustaches-seven-versts-long replied, "I see that you don't know that, though small, I am brave withal;" then, tearing the hero from the bench, he dragged him from corner to corner, bumped his head well against the walls, and then threw him, more dead than alive, beneath the bench. He himself took the roast ram from the table, ate it, bones and all, and vanished. The brothers returned and asked, "What's the matter? Why have you bandaged your head?" But Vechorka was ashamed to say that such a miserable little wretch had trounced him so soundly, and he said to his brothers, "I got a headache from looking to the fire without you, so that I could neither roast nor boil."

The next day Zor'ka and Vechorka went out to hunt, and Polunochka stayed behind to get the dinner ready. No sooner had he finished cooking the dinner, than there was again a rushing sound in the wood, and into the hut came the Muzhichek-no-bigger-than-your-thumb-but-with-moustaches-seven-versts-long, knocked Polunochka about, maimed him, pitched him under the bench, ate up the whole dinner, and vanished. Again the brothers returned and asked, "What's the matter, brotherkin? Why do you tie up your head with rags?"—"I have got a headache from looking to the fire, my brothers," replied Polunochka, "so that my poor little head was quite splitting, and therefore I could not get ready your dinner for you."

On the third day the elder brothers went to hunt, and Zor'ka remained in the hut alone, and thought to himself, "There's something not quite right here. It is not for nothing that my brothers have complained of the heat of the fire two days running." So he began to look all about, and to listen, in case any one should be coming to fall

upon him unawares.

He chose a ram, killed and cut it up, cleansed it, roasted it, and placed it on the table, and immediately there was a racket and a thundering in the wood, and in at the door rushed the Muzhichek-no-bigger-than-your-thumb-but-with-moustaches-seven-versts-long, with a rick of hay on his head, and in his hand a bucket of water. He put the bucket of water in the midst of the courtyard, strewed the straw all over the courtyard, and set about counting his sheep. He saw that there was yet another ram missing, flew into a violent rage, stamped on the ground with his little feet, dashed into the hut, and flung himself violently upon Zor'ka. But this Zor'ka was not like his brothers. He seized the Muzhichek by his moustaches, and began to drag him about the hut and well towzle him, and cried at the same time—

“If you don't know the ford

Don't step overboard.”

The Muzhichek-no-bigger-than-your-thumb wriggled about from side to side, tore himself out of Zor'ka's iron paws, though he left the ends of his moustaches in his fists, and ran away from him as hard as he could, Zor'ka after him—but whither, pray? He flew up into the air like fluff, vanished from before his eyes, and was gone. Zor'ka returned to the hut, and sat down by the window to await his beloved brothers.

The brothers arrived, and were quite astonished to find him hale and whole, and the dinner ready. But Zor'ka drew out from his girdle the ends of the long moustaches which he had torn from the monster, and said to his brothers, with a smile, “Look, my brothers, I have twisted your headache that you caught from the fire round my girdle! I see now that neither in strength nor stout-heartedness are ye fit comrades for me, so I will go on alone to discover the wondrous steed, but you go back to the village and plough land.” Then he took leave of his brothers, and went on his way.

Just as he was leaving the wood, Zor'ka came upon a crazy little hut, and in this crazy little hut he heard some one crying dolorously, “Whoever will give me to eat and to drink, him will I serve.” The good youth went into the hut, and saw that on the stove lay an armless, legless one, piteously groaning, and begging for meat and drink. Zor'ka gave him to eat and drink, and asked him who he was. “A hero was I, no whit worse than thou, but lo! I ate one of the rams of the Muzhichek-no-bigger-than-your-thumb, and he made me a cripple for the rest of my life. But because you have had compassion upon me, and given me both to eat and to drink, I will show you how to get the wondrous horse.”—“Show me, I pray, good man.”—“Go, then, to the river hard by,

take a ferry-boat on it, ferry people across it the whole year round, take money from none, and—you'll see what will happen.”

Zor'ka went to the river, took a ferry-boat, and a whole year round he ferried everybody across gratis. And it befell him once that he had to ferry over three old pilgrims. The old men got out on the bank, and began to undo their travelling purses, and the first pulled out a whole handful of gold, the second a whole roll of pure pearls, and the third the most precious stones. “There, that is for thy ferrying, good youth,” said the old men. “I can take nothing [30]from you,” said Zor'ka, “because I am here, according to promise, to ferry every one across without taking money for it.”—“Then for what dost thou do it?”—“I seek the wondrous horse which is not woolly white, but silvery bright, and I can find it nowhere; so that is why good people have advised me to hire a ferry-boat here, and they said, you shall see what will happen.”—“Well for thee, good youth, that thou hast been true to thy word; we can equip thee for thy journey.

Here is a little ring for thy little finger, do but transfer it from finger to finger, and all thy wishes will be gratified.” And the old men went on their way, but Zor'ka immediately put the ring on the other hand and said—“Let me be at once in those places where the Muzhichek-no-bigger-than-your-thumb lives and pastures his horse!”

And immediately the tempest took him, and before he could wink once he found himself in front of a deep chasm amongst the gloomy rocks, and he saw that in this side of the chasm, but on the very edge of it, was sitting the Muzhichek-no-bigger-than-your-thumb-but-with-moustaches-seven-versts-long, and around him was pacing the wondrous horse that was not woolly white, but silvery bright; on its brow shone a moon, and many stars were in its mane.

“Welcome, good youth!” screeched the monster to Zor'ka; “what brings you hither?”—“I am going to take your horse away from you.”—“Nay, 'tis not for you nor for any one else to take him from me. If I but seize him by the mane and lead him to the edge of this abyss, nobody in the world can take him away from hence, though they strive for ever and ever.”—“Well, then, let us exchange.”—“Willingly. I don't mind exchanging with you. You bring me hither the daughter of your Tsar, and I will give you my horse, and you may lead him from field to field.”—“Good,” said Zor'ka, and he immediately began considering how he might get the better of the monster. He transferred his ring from finger to finger, and said, “Let the lovely Tsarevna immediately appear here before me.”

And in the twinkling of an eye the Tsarevna appeared before him, all pale and trembling, and fell down on her knees before him, and begged and prayed him: “Good youth, wherefore hast thou conjured me away from my father? Oh, spare my tender youth!” But Zor’ka whispered her, “I want to get the better of that monster there. I’ll make believe to exchange you for the horse, and leave you with the monster as his wife; but you take this ring, and when you want to return home you have only to take it off one finger and put it on the other, and say, ‘I want to turn into a little needle to stick it into Zor’ka behind his collar,’ and you’ll see what will happen.”

And as Zor’ka had said to the Tsarevna, so it fell out. He gave the Tsarevna to the monster in exchange for the wondrous horse, put his martial harness on the horse, mounted, and went on his way; but the Muzhichek-no-bigger-than-your-thumb laughed and shouted after him, “Tis well, good youth; thou hast exchanged a lovely damsel for a horse.” Zor’ka had not gone two or three versts when he felt something pricking him behind the collar.

He put his hand there, and lo! there was a needle. He pitched it on the ground, and before him stood a lovely damsel, who wept and begged him to take her back to her dear father’s house. Zor’ka set her on the horse beside him, and galloped off as only heroes can gallop. He arrived at the Tsar’s court, and found the Tsar in an evil mood. The Tsar said to him, “I rejoice not at all, good youth, in thy faithful service, nor do I require the steed thou hast gotten for me, nor will I reward thee with aught according to thy merits.”—“And wherefore, pray, dear father Tsar?”—“Because, good youth, my daughter went away without my leave.”—“Nay, but, my Sovereign Lord and Tsar, it beseems thee not to trifle with me so: the Tsarevna was only this instant greeting me from out of her stronghold.”

Then the Tsar rushed into the stronghold, where he still found his daughter, embraced her, and brought her out to the good youth. “Here is thy reward and my delight.” And the Tsar took the horse, and gave his daughter to Zor’ka to wife, and half his tsardom along with her into the bargain. And Zor’ka still lives with his wife, and cannot love her enough, and he rejoices in his good fortune without over-much boasting

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