

The Story of the Tsarevich Ivan, and of the Harp that Harped Without a Harper

Robert Nisbet Bain

Russian

Intermediate
29 min read

Far, far behind the blue sea, behind the fiery abyss, in the void places, in the midst of the pleasant meadows, stood a lofty city, and in this city ruled Tsar Umnaya Golova¹ with his Tsaritsa. There they lived a long time, and to their great delight a daughter was born to them, a most lovely Tsarevna whom they called Neotsyenaya, and the next year there was born to them another daughter just as lovely, and her they named the Tsarevna Beztsyenaya. In his joy Tsar Umnaya Golova made merry and gladdened his heart, and feasted and ate and drank to his heart's content. He gave his voevods three hundred and three buckets of mead to toast him in, and bade them regale his whole realm with beer for three days.

Whoever liked might drink, and good measure was meted out to him. Now, when all the feasting and junketings were over, Tsar Umnaya Golova began to be troubled with the thought how to feed and nourish and train up his beloved daughters, and bring them under the golden crown. Great were the cares of the Tsar concerning his daughters. They were only fed with gold spoons, they were laid to sleep on eider-down beds, they were covered with sable coverlets, and three nurses took it in turn to drive away the flies when the

Tsarevnas laid them down to sleep. Tsar Umnaya Golova bade them watch over his daughters, and take care that the lovely sun never looked into their room with his bright rays, that the cold dew never fell on them, and that the truant wind never dared to blow upon them. And for the defence and protection of his daughters, the Tsar placed beside them seventy-seven nurses, and seventy-seven guardians—a certain wise man advised him to do so.

Thus Tsar Umnaya Golova with his Tsaritsa and his two daughters lived and thrived together. I know not how many years passed by, and the Tsarevnas began to grow up, fill out, and become beautiful. Wooers already began to make their appearance at the Tsar's court, but Tsar Umnaya Golova was in no great haste to marry off his daughters. He reflected that a destined wooer cannot be avoided even on a swift horse, while a wooer that is not destined cannot be held fast by triple iron chains, and while he was thus thinking and casting the matter over in his mind, he suddenly heard a great noise and commotion.

There was a scampering up and down and to and fro in his courtyard. The outdoor nurses were crying, the indoor nurses were howling, and the guardians were bawling with all their might. Tsar Umnaya Golova immediately rushed out and asked, "What is the matter?" Then the seventy-seven male attendants, and the seventy-seven female attendants all fell down on their knees before him. "We are guilty," they cried; "look now! the Tsarevnas Neotsyenaya and Beztsyenaya have been carried off by a whirlwind!"

A strange thing had happened. The Tsarevnas had gone out to walk in the Tsar's garden to pluck a few sweet-peas and wrench off a red poppy or two, and feast upon a few ripe pippins. Suddenly a black cloud rose up above them (whence it came nobody knew), blew right into the eyes of the nurses and guardians, and by the time they had come to themselves and begun to rub their eyes, all trace of the Tsarevnas had vanished, there was nothing for the eye to see or the ear to hear. Tsar Umnaya Golova regularly flared up with rage. "I will deliver you all over to an evil death!" said he. "You shall perish miserably in dungeons; I will bid them shoot at you with peas in the gates. What! seven-and-seventy of you nurses, and seven-and-seventy of you guardians, could not look after two Tsarevnas!"

And now Tsar Umnaya Golova was in sore trouble and affliction; he neither ate, nor drank, nor slept; everything was a grief and a burden to him; banquets at his court there were none, and the sound of the fiddle and the shawm was heard there no more. Only sad grief sat beside him and sang her mournful dirge like the croaking of a crow of evil omen.

But time passes and sorrow with it. The life of man is like a variegated tapestry, interwoven with dark flowers and bright. Time moved onwards, and then another child was born to the Tsar, but this time it was not a Tsarevna, but a Tsarevich. Tsar Umnaya Golova rejoiced greatly; he called his son Ivan, and placed beside him old-men nurses, foster-fathers, wise teachers, and valiant voevods.

And the Tsarevich Ivan began to grow and grow just as wheaten meal swells and swells when good yeast is put to it. He grew not by the day but by the hour, and what wondrous beauty, what a stately figure was his! One thing only weighed upon the heart of Tsar Umnaya Golova: good and beauteous was the Tsarevich Ivan, but there was nothing in him of heroic valour or of knightly skill. He did not tear off the heads of his comrades, nor break their arms and legs; he neither loved to play with lances of damask steel, nor with swords of tempered metal; he did not muster his strong battalions, nor hold converse with his voevods.

Good and beauteous was the Tsarevich Ivan; he amazed all men with his wit and wisdom, and his sole delight was to play on the harp that needed no harper. And the Tsarevich Ivan played so that all men forgot all else as they listened. The moment he placed his fingers on the strings they sang and played with such a wondrous voice that the very dumb wept for sympathy, and the very legless danced for joy. Beautiful songs they were, but they did not replenish the Tsar's treasure, nor defend the realm, nor smite the evil foe.

And one day Tsar Umnaya Golova bade them bring the Tsarevich Ivan before him, and thus he spake to him: "My beloved son, good art thou and beauteous, and I am well content with thee. One thing only grieves me. I do not see in thee the valour of a warrior, or the skill of a champion. Thou dost not love the clash of steel lances and the tempered blade has no charm for thee. Look now! I am growing old, and we have savage foes.

They will come to us, make our realm the spoil of war, put to death our boyars and voevods, and lead captive me and my Tsaritsa, for thou canst not defend us." The Tsarevich Ivan listened to the words of Tsar Umnaya Golova, and thus he made answer: "Dear Tsar-Gosudar and father! Not by strength but by craft are cities taken, not by cudgels but by cunning will I prevail against the foe. Make trial of my martial strength, make trial of my youthful valour. Look now! They tell me that I had two sisters, Tsarevnas, and that the truant whirlwind carried them away, and that the rumour of them vanished as if it were covered with snow. Call together now all thy princes, thy heroes, thy stalwart voevods, and bid them do thee the service of finding out my sisters, the Tsarevnas. Let them bring their damask blades, their iron lances, their glowing darts, and their countless soldiery; and if any one of them shall do thee this service, give to him my tsardom and bid me be unto him as a

scullion, to lick his pots, and as a fool to make him sport. But if they cannot render thee this service, then I will render it thee, and then thou shalt see that my wisdom and my wit is sharper than a damask blade, and stronger than a lance of steel.”

And the words of the Tsarevich pleased the Tsar. He called together his boyars, his vоеvods, his strong and mighty champions, and he said to them: “Is there any one of you, my boyars, vоеvods, strong and mighty champions, hero enough to go seek my daughters? If so, to him will I give to choose which of my daughters he will to be his love, and with her he shall have half my tsardom.” The boyars, the vоеvods, and the champions looked one upon another, and hid one behind the other, but not one of them dared to speak.

Then the Tsarevich Ivan bowed low before his father and said—“Dear Father-Gosudar! if none will take it upon him to render thee this paltry little service, give me thy blessing on my journey. I will go, I will seek my sisters, nor have I need of any royal gift from thee to enable me to do it.”—“Good!” replied Tsar Umnaya Golova; “my blessing go with thee. Take also of my treasures, silver and gold and precious stones, and if thou requirest soldiers, take a hundred thousand horse and a hundred thousand foot also.”

And the Tsarevich Ivan replied, “I need neither silver nor gold, neither horse nor foot, neither the horse of the champion nor his sword and lance. I will take with me my sweet-sounding harp that plays of its own accord, and nothing else. And thou, my Sovereign Tsar, await me these three years, and if I come not again in the fourth year, then choose thee my successor.” Then the Tsarevich Ivan received his father’s blessing both in writing and by word of mouth, commended himself to God, took his harp under his arm, and went straight on his way whither his eyes led him. Whither was he to go to find his sisters? He went and went near and far, high and low. The tale of his going is soon told, but the deed that he did is not soon done.

The Tsarevich Ivan went straight onwards, he went on and on, and as he went he played songs upon his harp; whenever the morning broke he arose again and wended his way along; when night fell he laid him down on the silky grass beneath the vast roof of the heavenly dome bright with stars. And at last he came to a dense forest. The Tsarevich Ivan heard a great cracking in this dense forest as if some one were smashing it, such a rumbling and a thundering was there in this forest. “What is this?” thought the Tsarevich Ivan; “a man must die once though no man can die twice.” And his eyes filled with terror, for he saw two wood demons fighting.

One was belabouring the other with an uprooted oak, and the other was pitching into his comrade with a pine tree five fathoms long, and the pair of them were fighting with all their devilish strength. The Tsarevich Ivan

approached them with his harp and struck up a dance. The demons stopped short, began to dance some devilish dance, and kicked up their [42]heels⁶ with such vigour that the very welkin rang. They danced and they danced, they danced themselves off their legs and rolled on to the ground, and the Tsarevich Ivan began to talk to them. "Come now! what are you quarrelling for?" said he. "Ye, my children, are regular wood demons, and yet ye make fools of yourselves as if ye were common people."

Then one of the wood demons said to him, "Wherefore should we not fight? Hearken and judge betwixt us! We were going on our way and we found something. I said, 'Tis mine; but he said, 'Tis mine—we tried to divide it and we could not divide it."—"And what then was it that you found?" asked the Tsarevich Ivan.—"This is what it was: a little bread-and-salt table-cloth, self-moving boots, and an invisible little cap. Dost thou want to eat and drink? Then spread out the little table-cloth, and twelve youths and twelve maids will bring thee mead to drink and sweetmeats as much as thou wilt! And if any one come that way, thou hast only to slip on the self-walking boots and thou canst go seven versts at one stride; nay, thou canst go even quicker than fourteen versts at one stride, so that no bird can fly level with thee and no wind can overtake thee. But if some unavoidable calamity threaten thee thou hast but to put on thy little invisible cap, and thou vanishest so completely that the very dogs cannot scent out thy whereabouts."

—"What a thing to quarrel about! Will ye agree to what I say if I divide what ye have found?" The wood demons agreed, and the Tsarevich Ivan said, "Look now! Run towards that little path, and whichever of you reaches it, he shall have the table-cloth, the boots, and the cap."—"Ah, now!" cried the wood demons, "that is common sense! Do thou hold the treasures and we will do the running." So away they went at full tilt, till nothing but their heels were visible and they disappeared in the forest. But the Tsarevich Ivan did not wait for them, he put the boots on his feet, the cap on his head, the little table-cloth under his arm, and made himself scarce as they call it. The wood demons came running back, but could not find the place where the Tsarevich had stood; but Ivan the Tsarevich, striding with great strides, got out of the wood and saw the wood demons running round him and beyond him, and trying to scent him out, but they could find nothing, and fell to wringing their hands.

Ivan the Tsarevich went on his way; he went on and on, he strode and strode, and he came to the open plains. Three roads lay before him, and in the cross-way stood a wretched little hut turning round and round on hen's legs. And Ivan the Tsarevich said to it, "Izbushka! izbushka!⁷ turn your back to the wood and your front to me!" Then Ivan the Tsarevich stepped into the hut, and there in the hut was sitting Baba-Yaga bony-leg.

"Fie! fie! fie!" said Baba-Yaga, "up to this day a Russian soul has been a sight unknown to my eyes and a sound

unknown to my ears, and now a Russian soul appears before my very eyes! For what hast thou come, good youth?”—“Oh, thou senseless Granny!” said the Tsarevich Ivan to her, “thou shouldst feed me well first, and only after that shouldst thou begin to ask questions.” Baba-Yaga leaped up in the twinkling of an eye, heated her little stove, fed Ivan the Tsarevich, and then began to ask him, “Whither dost thou go, good youth, and whither does thy way lie?”—“I go,” said Ivan the Tsarevich, “to seek my sisters, the Tsarevna Neotsyenaya and the Tsarevna Beztsyenaya. But now, dear little Granny, tell me, if thou knowest, what way must I go, and where shall I find them?”—“I know where the Tsarevna Neotsyenaya lives!” said Baba-Yaga; “thou must take the middle road to get to her, but she lives in the white stone palace of her old husband the Forest Monster. The road thither is hard, far must thou go; and if thou gettest there ’twill boot thee little, for the Forest Monster will devour thee.”

—“Well, little Granny, perhaps it will choke him. A Russian man is a bony morsel, and God will not give him over to be eaten by a swine like that! Farewell! and thank you for your bread and salt!” And so the Tsarevich Ivan strode away from her, and look!—there, right across the plain, shone white and dazzling the stony palace of the Forest Monster. Ivan went up to it and saw the gate, and on the gate sat a sort of little devil who said, “No admittance!”—“Open, my friend!” replied Ivan the Tsarevich, “and I’ll give thee some vodka!”

The little devil took the vodka, but he didn’t open the gate for all that. Then Ivan the Tsarevich went round about the palace and resolved to climb over the wall. He climbed up and along and never observed the trap into which he was falling, for on the top of the walls wires were spread all about, and the moment the Tsarevich Ivan touched one of these wires with his foot all the bells fell a-ringing. Ivan the Tsarevich looked, and out upon the balcony rushed his sister the Tsarevna Neotsyenaya and said, “Is it thou then that hast come, my beloved brother, Ivan the Tsarevich?”

And the brother and the sister embraced and kissed each other. “Where shall I hide thee from the Monster of the Forest?” said the Tsarevna Neotsyenaya, “for I believe he will be here at once.”—“Where indeed, for I am no needle.” The brother and sister were still talking when suddenly there was the dull roar of a tempest and whirlwind, all the palace trembled, and the Monster of the Forest appeared; but Ivan the Tsarevich put on his little invisible cap and became invisible. And the Forest Monster said, “Where then is thy guest who climbed over the wall?”—“I have no guest here at all,” replied the Tsarevna Neotsyenaya, “but perhaps the sparrows have been flying over it and stuck to it with their wings!”—“Sparrows indeed! Methinks I smell the smell of a Russian soul here!”—“What are you dreaming about? You run about the wide world and do nothing but harass

souls, and now you would vex other souls also!”—“Don’t be angry, Tsarevna Neotsyenaya, I do no harm to thy happiness, only I have now a desire to eat, and I should like to eat up this unknown,” said the Forest Monster.

Ivan the Tsarevich, however, took off his invisible cap, bowed to the Forest Monster, and said, “Why do you want to eat me? Don’t you see what a lean and bony morsel I am! Rather let me regale you with a breakfast such as you have never eaten since the day of your birth, only take care that you don’t swallow your tongue and all!” Then Ivan the Tsarevich spread out his little bread-and-salt table-cloth, the twelve youths and the twelve damsels appeared, and began to regale the Forest Monster with as much as ever he could eat. The Forest Monster ate and ate and ate, then he drank, and then he ate again, till he was unable to stir from the spot; he fell asleep in the very place where he sat.

“And now farewell, my beloved sister!” said the Tsarevich Ivan; “yet tell me, dost thou not know the place where our sister the Tsarevna Beztsyenaya dwells?”—“I know it,” replied the Tsarevna Neotsyenaya; “thou must go to her along the great sea Ocean, there she dwells in the very whirlpool of the ocean with her old husband the Sea Monster; but the way thither is hard. Far, very far must thou swim, and if thou gettest there it will boot thee little, for he will devour thee!”—“Well,” said the Tsarevich Ivan, “he may chew me perhaps, but he will find me a hard morsel to swallow. Farewell, sister!”

And Ivan the Tsarevich began to stride onwards, and he came to the great sea Ocean. By the shore stood a boat such as the Russian people use when they go a-fishing; the shrouds and gear were of linden bast, the sails of fine hair mats, and the boat itself was not welded with nails, but sown fast with birch-bark. On this ship the mariners were getting ready to go to sea, to sail to the Rock-Salt Island.

“Won’t you take me with you?” said the Tsarevich Ivan; “I will pay you nothing for my passage, but I will tell you tales so that you will never notice how long the journey is.” The ship-folk agreed, and they sailed away upon the great sea Ocean, they sailed past the Rock-Salt Island; the Tsarevich Ivan told them tales, and they sailed and sailed. Suddenly, whence they knew not, a tempest came flying up, the thunder began to growl, and the ship began to quake. “Alas!” shrieked the ship’s folk, “to our own destruction have we listened to this fair speaker, never shall we see our dear little homes again, we shall descend into the whirlpools of Ocean! There is no help for it, we must pay tribute to the Monster of the Sea; let us cast lots, it will fall upon the guilty!”

They cast lots, and it fell upon the Tsarevich Ivan. “It can’t be helped, my brothers!” said the Tsarevich Ivan. “I thank you for your bread and salt; farewell, nor think amiss of me in time to come!” Then he took with him his

self-walking boots, his little bread-and-salt table-cloth, his little invisible cap, and his harp that harped of its own accord, and they raised the good youth and swung him right out into the whirlpools of Ocean. The sea became calm, the boat sped on, and the Tsarevich Ivan went like a key to the bottom, and stood upright on his legs in the halls of the Monster of the Sea, the wondrous flower-grown halls of ocean!

The Sea Monster was sitting on his throne with the Tsarevna Beztsyenaya by his side, and the Sea Monster said, "Tis a long time since I have eaten fresh flesh, and lo! it comes right into my very hands! Welcome, friend! Come here, and let me see at which end of you I may begin!" Then the Tsarevich Ivan began to say that he was the brother of the Tsarevna Beztsyenaya, and that amongst good people one behaved not so badly as to eat another up.

"That is too much!" shrieked the Sea Monster; "he comes to force his own rules and regulations upon the homes of other people!" Ivan the Tsarevich saw that things were going badly, so he took out his harp that played of its own accord, and when he began playing a plaintive air, the Sea Monster began to pull wry faces, then fell to sighing like a blacksmith's bellows, and wept and moaned just as if he had swallowed a needle; and then, when the Tsarevich Ivan struck up the air, "Let the merry churochki go round the little table!" why then indeed the very halls put their arms akimbo and fell a-dancing, while the Sea Monster could not skip up and down enough, but stamped with his feet, snapped with his fingers, rolled his eyes about, and pulled such faces that all the fishes flocked round to see, and nearly died for laughter. The Monster of the Sea thoroughly enjoyed himself.

"Well!" said he, "twould be a sin to eat such a youth. Stop here, stay with us, sit down and be our guest, won't you? Here are lots of herrings, pike, bream, and perch! Come, sit down at table, eat, drink, and be merry, my dear guest!" So Ivan the Tsarevich and the Tsarevna Beztsyenaya and the Sea Monster sat down, and ate and drank and made merry. A whale danced a German dance in front of them, the herrings sang glees, the carps performed on various instruments. After dinner the Sea Monster went to sleep, and the Tsarevna Beztsyenaya said, "My beloved brother, I am glad to see thee, dear guest; so far well, but 'twill not last for ever. When he awakes the Sea Monster will eat thee if the evil humour takes him."—"Tell me, darling sister," said the Tsarevich Ivan, "how I may save our sister Neotsyenaya from the Forest Monster, and thee from the Monster of the Sea?"—"If you like you may try your luck, but you'll find it, I think, a ticklish business.

Behind the great sea Ocean here lies a large tsardom, and there reigns there not a Tsar but a Tsaritsa called the Tsar-Maiden. If thou makest thy way thither, and gettest into her fenced garden, then the Tsar-Maiden will

become thy consort, and she only can free us and restore us to our father and mother. But the mischief of it is this—she has a strict guard which will allow no one to cross the shore, a guard all bristling with guns and lances, and fastened to each lance is a head, and all these poor little heads are the heads of the youths who came to woo the Tsar-Maiden.

There were tsars, tsareviches, kings, kings' sons, mightily strong warriors, and they came with hosts, and they sailed with ships, and were able to do nothing; all of them were stuck upon lances.”—“Look now!” said the Tsarevich Ivan, “what is there to fear? Terrible are the threats of Heaven and manifold is the mercy of God. Tell me but how I may get to the tsardom of the Tsar-Maiden.”—“But is it a wise thing to make thy way thither? Nevertheless I'll give thee my beloved sturgeon; sit upon him and go thy way, and my swift runner the long-nosed sterlet shall swim before thee to show the way.” The brother and sister then said farewell, the Tsarevich Ivan sat him on the sturgeon and sped away, and the sterlet went on before to show the way. They fell in with some crabs, and they saluted the Tsarevich Ivan with their moustaches, and beat the drums with their clippers, and drove the little fishes out of the way. But the sea is not the same thing as the dry land.

There was neither hemp nor bramble to hold on by, the way was slippery, as slippery as grease. The Tsarevich Ivan slipped and slipped. Then he put on his little invisible cap and saw that the guards of the Tsar-Maiden were opening wide their eyes and gazing afar off, and saw nothing that was going on beneath their noses, and they were still whetting their swords and sharpening their spears. And the Tsarevich Ivan came to the shore, the sturgeon set him safely on the quay, made an obeisance, and jumped into the water again; but the Tsarevich Ivan went past the guard without bending his knee, and entered the fenced garden as if he were the master there; he walked about, he walked all over it, he diverted himself, and ate of the luscious and transparent apples there.

And lo! the Tsarevich lingered and lingered there. And he saw twenty white doves flying towards a pond. They lighted on the ground and became twenty maidens lovely as the stars of heaven and as goodly as blood and milk. Amongst them the Tsar-Maiden was walking like a peacock, and said, “My beloved friends, 'tis hot; ye see how the sun burns like an oven. Let us bathe! No evil eye can see us here. So strong a guard stands on the shore that not even a fly could pass by them.”—“A fly cannot pass them, eh! Look now what a big fly has passed them,” said the Tsarevich Ivan, and he took off his little invisible cap and bowed low to the Tsar-Maiden. The Tsar-Maiden and her comrades, as maidens are wont to do, shrieked and moaned, thought of running away and didn't, made as though they wouldn't look and looked all the same, and winked and blinked with their

eyes. "Tsar-Maiden, and ye, lovely damsels," said the Tsarevich Ivan, "wherefore do ye fear me? I am not a bear, I shall not bite you, I will take no one's heart against her will; but if my destined bride be here, then am I her destined bridegroom."

Then the Tsar-Maiden turned as scarlet as the red poppy-flower, gave her white hand to the Tsarevich Ivan, and said, "Welcome, good youth! Whether thou be tsar or tsarevich, king or king's son, I know not; but if thou hast come hither as a gentle guest, thy reception shall be as beseemeth a dear friend. Many brutal wooers have come to me who would have taken my virginal heart by force, such a thing as was never heard of since the beginning of the world. Come into my white stone halls and into my crystal chambers!"

The whole nation heard that their Tsarevna, the Tsar-Maiden, had got her a bridegroom after her own heart, and they came in swarms both of young and old, and shouted and rejoiced with all their might. And the Tsar-Maiden commanded that the royal cellar should be opened for them, and that they should be allowed to beat drums and guitars and play fiddles; and the next day they played at the merry banquet and the wedding feast. And there were banquets for three days and rejoicings for three weeks. And after that the Tsarevich Ivan spoke to his consort about releasing his sisters, one from the Monster of the Forest and the other from the Monster of the Sea. "My beloved consort, Ivan the Tsarevich," she replied, "what would I not do for thee! Send and fetch me my hedgehog-lawyer and my sparrow-scribe, and let them send ukases to the Monster of the Forest and the Monster of the Sea, bidding them give up the sisters of Ivan the Tsarevich, or I will take them into custody and give them over to a cruel death."

So the hedgehog-lawyer and the sparrow-scribe wrote out ukases and sent them off. And the Monster of the Forest and the Monster of the Sea could do nothing, so they set free the Tsarevna Neotsyenaya and the Tsarevna Beztsyenaya. And the Tsarevich Ivan wrote this letter to his father, the Tsar Umnaya Golova: "Thou seest, O Sovereign Tsar, that not with strength and valour only but with craft and wit also can one prevail over all. And the self-playing harp is sometimes of as good service as the Damascus blade, although of course one must not lash it with a whip. And now come to me, dear father, and be my guest, and I will be with thee with my wife and my sisters. A goodly banquet is ready, and I wish thee long years and many." And so Ivan the Tsarevich lived a joyous life, and waxed rich and prosperous. And he lived long and reigned gloriously, and feasted me right royally, so I made up this merry tale about him.

Read more fairy tales on Fairytalez.com