

OLD PETER'S
RUSSIAN TALES



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SALT



One evening, when they were sitting round the table after their supper, old Peter asked the children what story they would like to hear. Vanya asked whether there were any stories left which they had not already heard.

“Why,” said old Peter, “you have heard scarcely any of the stories, for there is a story to be told about everything in the world.”

“About everything, grandfather?” asked Vanya.

“About everything,” said old Peter.

“About the sky, and the thunder, and the dogs, and the flies, and the birds, and the trees, and the milk?”

“There is a story about every one of those things.”

“I know something there isn’t a story about,” said Vanya.

“And what’s that?” asked old Peter, smiling in his beard.

“Salt,” said Vanya. “There can’t be a story about salt.” He put the tip of his finger into the little box of salt on the table, and then he touched his tongue with his finger to taste.

“But of course there is a story about salt,” said old Peter.

“Tell it us,” said Maroosia; and presently, when his pipe had been lit twice and gone out, old Peter began.

* * * * *

Once upon a time there were three brothers, and their father was a great merchant who sent his ships far over the sea, and traded here and there in countries the names of which I, being an old man, can never rightly call to mind. Well, the names of the two elder brothers do not matter, but the youngest was called Ivan the Ninny, because he was always playing and never working; and if there was a silly thing to do, why, off he went and did it. And so, when the brothers grew up, the father sent the two elder ones off, each in a fine ship laden with gold and jewels, and rings and bracelets, and laces and silks, and sticks with little bits of silver hammered into their handles, and spoons with patterns of blue and red, and everything else you can think of that costs too much to buy. But he made Ivan the Ninny stay at home, and did not give him a ship at all. Ivan saw his brothers go sailing off over the sea on a summer morning, to make their fortunes and come back rich men; and then, for the first time in his life, he wanted to work and do something useful. He went to his father and kissed his hand, and he kissed the hand of his little old mother, and he begged his father to give him a ship so that he could try his fortune like his brothers.

“But you have never done a wise thing in your life, and no one could count all the silly things you’ve done if he spent a hundred days in counting,” said his father.

“True,” said Ivan; “but now I am going to be wise, and sail the sea and come back with something in my pockets to show that I am not a ninny any longer. Give me just a little ship, father mine — just a little ship for myself.”

“Give him a little ship,” said the mother. “He may not be a ninny after all.”

“Very well,” said his father. “I will give him a little ship; but I am not going to waste good roubles by giving him a rich cargo.”

“Give me any cargo you like,” said Ivan.

So his father gave him a little ship, a little old ship, and a cargo of rags and scraps and things that were not fit for anything but to be thrown away. And he gave him a crew of ancient old sailormen who were past work; and Ivan went on board and sailed away at sunset, like the ninny he was. And the feeble, ancient, old sailormen pulled

up the ragged, dirty sails, and away they went over the sea to learn what fortune, good or bad, God had in mind for a crew of old men with a ninny for a master.

The fourth day after they set sail there came a great wind over the sea. The feeble old men did the best they could with the ship; but the old, torn sails tore from the masts, and the wind did what it pleased, and threw the little ship on an unknown island away in the middle of the sea. Then the wind dropped, and left the little ship on the beach, and Ivan the Ninny and his ancient old men, like good Russians, praising God that they were still alive.

“Well, children,” said Ivan, for he knew how to talk to sailors, “do you stay here and mend the sails, and make new ones out of the rags we carry as cargo, while I go inland and see if there is anything that could be of use to us.”

So the ancient old sailormen sat on deck with their legs crossed, and made sails out of rags, of torn scraps of old brocades, of soiled embroidered shawls, of all the rubbish that they had with them for a cargo. You never saw such sails. The tide came up and floated the ship, and they threw out anchors at bow and stern, and sat there in the sunlight, making sails and patching them and talking of the days when they were young. All this while Ivan the Ninny went walking off into the island.

Now in the middle of that island was a high mountain, a high mountain it was, and so white that when he came near it Ivan the Ninny began thinking of sheepskin coats, although it was midsummer and the sun was hot in the sky. The trees were green round about, but there was nothing growing on the mountain at all. It was just a great white mountain piled up into the sky in the middle of a green island. Ivan walked a little way up the white slopes of the mountain, and then, because he felt thirsty, he thought he would let a little snow melt in his mouth. He took some in his fingers and stuffed it in. Quickly enough it came out again, I can tell you, for the mountain was not made of snow but of good Russian salt. And if you want to try what a mouthful of salt is like, you may.

“No, thank you, grandfather,” the children said hurriedly together. Old Peter went on with his tale.

SALT

Ivan the Ninny did not stop to think twice. The salt was so clean and shone so brightly in the sunlight. He just turned round and ran back to the shore, and called out to his ancient old sailormen and told them to empty everything they had on board over into the sea. Over it all went, rags and tags and rotten timbers, till the little ship was as empty as a soup bowl after supper. And then those ancient old men were set to work carrying salt from the mountain and taking it on board the little ship, and stowing it away below deck till there was not room for another grain. Ivan the Ninny would have liked to take the whole mountain, but there was not room in the little ship. And for that the ancient old sailormen thanked God, because their backs ached and their old legs were weak, and they said they would have died if they had had to carry any more.

Then they hoisted up the new sails they had patched together out of the rags and scraps of shawls and old brocades, and they sailed away once more over the blue sea. And the wind stood fair, and they sailed before it, and the ancient old sailors rested their backs, and told old tales, and took turn and turn about at the rudder.

And after many days' sailing they came to a town, with towers and churches and painted roofs, all set on the side of a hill that sloped down into the sea. At the foot of the hill was a quiet harbour, and they sailed in there and moored the ship and hauled down their patchwork sails.

Ivan the Ninny went ashore, and took with him a little bag of clean white salt to show what kind of goods he had for sale, and he asked his way to the palace of the Tzar of that town. He came to the palace, and went in and bowed to the ground before the Tzar.

"Who are you?" says the Tzar.

"I, great lord, am a Russian merchant, and here in a bag is some of my merchandise, and I beg your leave to trade with your subjects in this town."

"Let me see what is in the bag," says the Tzar. Ivan the Ninny took a handful from the bag and showed it to the Tzar.

"What is it?" says the Tzar.

"Good Russian salt," says Ivan the Ninny.

Now in that country they had never heard of salt, and the Tzar looked at the salt, and he looked at Ivan and he laughed.

"Why, this," says he, "is nothing but white dust, and that we can pick up for nothing. The men of my town have no need to trade with you. You must be a ninny."

Ivan grew very red, for he knew what his father used to call him. He was ashamed to say anything. So he bowed to the ground, and went away out of the palace.

But when he was outside he thought to himself, "I wonder what sort of salt they use in these parts if they do not know good Russian salt when they see it. I will go to the kitchen."

So he went round to the back door of the palace, and put his head into the kitchen, and said, "I am very tired. May I sit down here and rest a little while?"

"Come in," says one of the cooks. "But you must sit just there, and not put even your little finger in the way of us; for we are the Tzar's cooks, and we are in the middle of making ready his dinner." And the cook put a stool in a corner out of the way, and Ivan slipped in round the door, and sat down in the corner and looked about him. There were seven cooks at least, boiling and baking, and stewing and toasting, and roasting and frying. And as for scullions, they were as thick as cockroaches, dozens of them, running to and fro, tumbling over each other, and helping the cooks.

Ivan the Ninny sat on his stool, with his legs tucked under him and the bag of salt on his knees. He watched the cooks and the scullions, but he did not see them put anything in the dishes which he thought could take the place of salt. No; the meat was without salt, the kasha was without salt, and there was no salt in the potatoes. Ivan nearly turned sick at the thought of the tastelessness of all that food.

There came the moment when all the cooks and scullions ran out of the kitchen to fetch the silver platters on which to lay the dishes. Ivan slipped down from his stool, and running from stove to stove, from saucepan to frying pan, he dropped a pinch of salt, just what was wanted, no more no less, in every one of the dishes. Then he ran back to the stool in the corner, and sat there, and watched the dishes being put on the silver platters and carried off in gold-embroidered napkins to be the dinner of the Tzar.

The Tzar sat at table and took his first spoonful of soup.

“The soup is very good to-day,” says he, and he finishes the soup to the last drop.

“I’ve never known the soup so good,” says the Tzaritza, and she finishes hers.

“This is the best soup I ever tasted,” says the Princess, and down goes hers, and she, you know, was the prettiest princess who ever had dinner in this world.

It was the same with the kasha and the same with the meat. The Tzar and the Tzaritza and the Princess wondered why they had never had so good a dinner in all their lives before.

“Call the cooks,” says the Tzar. And they called the cooks, and the cooks all came in, and bowed to the ground, and stood in a row before the Tzar.

“What did you put in the dishes to-day that you never put before?” says the Tzar.

“We put nothing unusual, your greatness,” say the cooks, and bowed to the ground again.

“Then why do the dishes taste better?”

“We do not know, your greatness,” say the cooks.

“Call the scullions,” says the Tzar. And the scullions were called, and they too bowed to the ground, and stood in a row before the Tzar.

“What was done in the kitchen to-day that has not been done there before?” says the Tzar.

“Nothing, your greatness,” say all the scullions except one.

And that one scullion bowed again, and kept on bowing, and then he said, “Please, your greatness, please, great lord, there is usually none in the kitchen but ourselves; but to-day there was a young Russian merchant, who sat on a stool in the corner and said he was tired.”

“Call the merchant,” says the Tzar.

So they brought in Ivan the Ninny, and he bowed before the Tzar, and stood there with his little bag of salt in his hand.

“Did you do anything to my dinner?” says the Tzar.

“I did, your greatness,” says Ivan.

“What did you do?”

“I put a pinch of Russian salt in every dish.”

“That white dust?” says the Tzar.

"Nothing but that."

"Have you got any more of it?"

"I have a little ship in the harbour laden with nothing else," says Ivan.

"It is the most wonderful dust in the world," says the Tzar, "and I will buy every grain of it you have. What do you want for it?"

Ivan the Ninny scratched his head and thought. He thought that if the Tzar liked it as much as all that it must be worth a fair price, so he said, "We will put the salt into bags, and for every bag of salt you must give me three bags of the same weight — one of gold, one of silver, and one of precious stones. Cheaper than that, your greatness, I could not possibly sell."

"Agreed," says the Tzar. "And a cheap price, too, for a dust so full of magic that it makes dull dishes tasty, and tasty dishes so good that there is no looking away from them."

So all the day long, and far into the night, the ancient old sailormen bent their backs under sacks of salt, and bent them again under sacks of gold and silver and precious stones. When all the salt had been put in the Tzar's treasury — yes, with twenty soldiers guarding it with great swords shining in the moonlight — and when the little ship was loaded with riches, so that even the deck was piled high with precious stones, the ancient old men lay down among the jewels and slept till morning, when Ivan the Ninny went to bid good-bye to the Tzar.

"And whither shall you sail now?" asked the Tzar.

"I shall sail away to Russia in my little ship," says Ivan.

And the Princess, who was very beautiful, said, "A little Russian ship?"

"Yes," says Ivan.

"I have never seen a Russian ship," says the Princess, and she begs her father to let her go to the harbour with her nurses and maids, to see the little Russian ship before Ivan set sail.

She came with Ivan to the harbour, and the ancient old sailormen took them on board.

She ran all over the ship, looking now at this and now at that, and Ivan told her the names of everything — deck, mast, and rudder.

"May I see the sails?" she asked. And the ancient old men hoisted the ragged sails, and the wind filled the sails and tugged.

“Why doesn’t the ship move when the sails are up?” asked the Princess.

“The anchor holds her,” said Ivan.

“Please let me see the anchor,” says the Princess.

“Haul up the anchor, my children, and show it to the Princess,” says Ivan to the ancient old sailormen.

And the old men hauled up the anchor, and showed it to the Princess; and she said it was a very good little anchor. But, of course, as soon as the anchor was up the ship began to move. One of the ancient old men bent over the tiller, and, with a fair wind behind her, the little ship slipped out of the harbour and away to the blue sea. When the Princess looked round, thinking it was time to go home, the little ship was far from land, and away in the distance she could only see the gold towers of her father’s palace, glittering like pin points in the sunlight. Her nurses and maids wrung their hands and made an outcry, and the Princess sat down on a heap of jewels, and put a handkerchief to her eyes, and cried and cried and cried.

Ivan the Ninny took her hands and comforted her, and told her of the wonders of the sea that he would show her, and the wonders of the land. And she looked up at him while he talked, and his eyes were kind and hers were sweet; and the end of it was that they were both very well content, and agreed to have a marriage feast as soon as the little ship should bring them to the home of Ivan’s father. Merry was that voyage. All day long Ivan and the Princess sat on deck and said sweet things to each other, and at twilight they sang songs, and drank tea, and told stories. As for the nurses and maids, the Princess told them to be glad; and so they danced and clapped their hands, and ran about the ship, and teased the ancient old sailormen.

When they had been sailing many days, the Princess was looking out over the sea, and she cried out to Ivan, “See, over there, far away, are two big ships with white sails, not like our sails of brocade and bits of silk.”

Ivan looked, shading his eyes with his hands.

“Why, those are the ships of my elder brothers,” said he. “We shall all sail home together.”

And he made the ancient old sailormen give a hail in their cracked old voices. And the brothers heard them, and came on board to greet

Ivan and his bride. And when they saw that she was a Tzar's daughter, and that the very decks were heaped with precious stones, because there was no room below, they said one thing to Ivan and something else to each other.

To Ivan they said, "Thanks be to God, He has given you good trading."

But to each other, "How can this be?" says one. "Ivan the Ninny bringing back such a cargo, while we in our fine ships have only a bag or two of gold."

"And what is Ivan the Ninny doing with a princess?" says the other.

And they ground their teeth, and waited their time, and came up suddenly, when Ivan was alone in the twilight, and picked him up by his head and his heels, and hove him overboard into the dark blue sea.

Not one of the old men had seen them, and the Princess was not on deck. In the morning they said that Ivan the Ninny must have walked overboard in his sleep. And they drew lots. The eldest brother took the Princess, and the second brother took the little ship laden with gold and silver and precious stones. And so the brothers sailed home very well content. But the Princess sat and wept all day long, looking down into the blue water. The elder brother could not comfort her, and the second brother did not try. And the ancient old sailormen muttered in their beards, and were sorry, and prayed to God to give rest to Ivan's soul; for although he had been a ninny, and although he had made them carry a lot of salt and other things, yet they loved him, because he knew how to talk to ancient old sailormen.

But Ivan was not dead. As soon as he splashed into the water, he crammed his fur hat a little tighter on his head, and began swimming in the sea. He swam about until the sun rose, and then, not far away, he saw a floating timber log, and he swam to the log, and got astride of it, and thanked God. And he sat there on the log in the middle of the sea, twiddling his thumbs for want of something to do.

There was a strong current in the sea that carried him along, and at last, after floating for many days without ever a bite for his teeth or a drop for his gullet, his feet touched land. Now that was at night, and he left the log and walked up out of the sea, and lay down on the shore and waited for morning.

When the sun rose he stood up, and saw that he was on a bare island, and he saw nothing at all on the island except a huge house as big as a mountain; and as he was looking at the house the great door creaked with a noise like that of a hurricane among the pine forests, and opened; and a giant came walking out, and came to the shore, and stood there, looking down at Ivan.

“What are you doing here, little one?” says the giant.

Ivan told him the whole story, just as I have told it to you.

The giant listened to the very end, pulling at his monstrous whiskers. Then he said, “Listen, little one. I know more of the story than you, for I can tell you that to-morrow morning your eldest brother is going to marry your Princess. But there is no need for you to take on about it. If you want to be there, I will carry you and set you down before the house in time for the wedding. And a fine wedding it is like to be, for your father thinks well of those brothers of yours bringing back all those precious stones, and silver and gold enough to buy a kingdom.”

And with that he picked up Ivan the Ninny and set him on his great shoulders, and set off striding through the sea.

He went so fast that the wind of his going blew off Ivan’s hat.

“Stop a moment,” shouts Ivan; “my hat has blown off.”

“We can’t turn back for that,” says the giant; “we have already left your hat five hundred versts behind us.” And he rushed on, splashing through the sea. The sea was up to his armpits. He rushed on, and the sea was up to his waist. He rushed on, and before the sun had climbed to the top of the blue sky he was splashing up out of the sea with the water about his ankles. He lifted Ivan from his shoulders and set him on the ground.

“Now,” says he, “little man, off you run, and you’ll be in time for the feast. But don’t you dare to boast about riding on my shoulders. If you open your mouth about that you’ll smart for it, if I have to come ten thousand thousand versts.”

Ivan the Ninny thanked the giant for carrying him through the sea, promised that he would not boast, and then ran off to his father’s house. Long before he got there he heard the musicians in the courtyard playing as if they wanted to wear out their instruments before

night. The wedding feast had begun, and when Ivan ran in, there, at the high board, was sitting the Princess, and beside her his eldest brother. And there were his father and mother, his second brother, and all the guests. And everyone of them was as merry as could be, except the Princess, and she was as white as the salt he had sold to her father.

Suddenly the blood flushed into her cheeks. She saw Ivan in the doorway. Up she jumped at the high board, and cried out, "There, there is my true love, and not this man who sits beside me at the table."

"What is this?" says Ivan's father, and in a few minutes knew the whole story.

He turned the two elder brothers out of doors, gave their ships to Ivan, married him to the Princess, and made him his heir. And the wedding feast began again, and they sent for the ancient old sailormen to take part in it. And the ancient old sailormen wept with joy when they saw Ivan and the Princess, like two sweet pigeons, sitting side by side; yes, and they lifted their flagons with their old shaking hands, and cheered with their old cracked voices, and poured the wine down their dry old throats.

There was wine enough and to spare, beer too, and mead — enough to drown a herd of cattle. And as the guests drank and grew merry and proud they set to boasting. This one bragged of his riches, that one of his wife. Another boasted of his cunning, another of his new house, another of his strength, and this one was angry because they would not let him show how he could lift the table on one hand. They all drank Ivan's health, and he drank theirs, and in the end he could not bear to listen to their proud boasts.

"That's all very well," says he, "but I am the only man in the world who rode on the shoulders of a giant to come to his wedding feast."

The words were scarcely out of his mouth before there were a tremendous trampling and a roar of a great wind. The house shook with the footsteps of the giant as he strode up. The giant bent down over the courtyard and looked in at the feast.

"Little man, little man," says he, "you promised not to boast of me. I told you what would come if you did, and here you are and have boasted already."

SALT

“Forgive me,” says Ivan; “it was the drink that boasted, not I.”

“What sort of drink is it that knows how to boast?” says the giant.

“You shall taste it,” says Ivan.

And he made his ancient old sailormen roll a great barrel of wine into the yard, more than enough for a hundred men, and after that a barrel of beer that was as big, and then a barrel of mead that was no smaller.

“Try the taste of that,” says Ivan the Ninny.

Well, the giant did not wait to be asked twice. He lifted the barrel of wine as if it had been a little glass, and emptied it down his throat. He lifted the barrel of beer as if it had been an acorn, and emptied it after the wine. Then he lifted the barrel of mead as if it had been a very small pea, and swallowed every drop of mead that was in it. And after that he began stamping about and breaking things. Houses fell to pieces this way and that, and trees were swept flat like grass. Every step the giant took was followed by the crash of breaking timbers. Then suddenly he fell flat on his back and slept. For three days and nights he slept without waking. At last he opened his eyes.

“Just look about you,” says Ivan, “and see the damage that you’ve done.”

“And did that little drop of drink make me do all that?” says the giant. “Well, well, I can well understand that a drink like that can do a bit of bragging. And after that,” says he, looking at the wrecks of houses, and all the broken things scattered about — “after that,” says he, “you can boast of me for a thousand years, and I’ll have nothing against you.”

And he tugged at his great whiskers, and wrinkled his eyes, and went striding off into the sea.

That is the story about salt, and how it made a rich man of Ivan the Ninny, and besides, gave him the prettiest wife in the world, and she a Tzar’s daughter.

