Old Peter's Russian Tales
by Arthur Ransome

Baba Yaga

"Tell us about Baba Yaga," begged Maroosia.

"Yes," said Vanya, "please, grandfather, and about the little hut on hen's legs."

"Baba Yaga is a witch," said old Peter; "a terrible old woman she is, but sometimes kind enough. You know it was she who told Prince Ivan how to win one of the daughters of the Tzar of the Sea, and that was the best daughter of the bunch, Vasilissa the Very Wise. But then Baba Yaga is usually bad, as in the case of Vasilissa the Very Beautiful, who was only saved from her iron teeth by the cleverness of her Magic Doll."

"Tell us the story of the Magic Doll," begged Maroosia.

"I will some day," said old Peter.

"And has Baba Yaga really got iron teeth?" asked Vanya.

"Iron, like the poker and tongs," said old Peter.

"What for?" said Maroosia.

"To eat up little Russian children," said old Peter, "when she can get them. She usually only eats bad ones, because the good ones get away. She is bony all over, and her eyes flash, and she drives about in a mortar, beating it with a pestle, and sweeping up her tracks with a besom, so that you cannot tell which way she has gone."

"And her hut?" said Vanya. He had often heard about it before, but he wanted to hear about it again. "She lives in a little hut which stands on hen's legs. Sometimes it faces the forest, sometimes it faces the path, and sometimes it walks solemnly about. But in some of the stories she lives in another kind of hut, with a railing of tall sticks, and a skull on each stick. And all night long fire glows in the skulls and fades as the dawn rises."

"Now tell us one of the Baba Yaga stories," said Maroosia.

"Please," said Vanya.

"I will tell you how one little girl got away from her, and then, if ever she catches you, you will know exactly what to do."

And old Peter put down his pipe and began:—

Baba Yaga and the Girl With the Kind Heart

Once upon a time there was a widowed old man who lived alone in a hut with his little daughter. Very merry they were together, and they used to smile at each other over a table just piled with bread and jam. Everything went well, until the old man took it into his head to marry again.

Yes, the old man became foolish in the years of his old age, and he took another wife. And so the poor little girl had a stepmother. And after that everything changed. There was no more bread and jam on the table, and no more playing bo-peep, first this side of the samovar and then that, as she sat with her father at tea. It was worse than that, for she never did sit at tea. The stepmother said that everything that went wrong was the little girl's fault. And the old man believed his new wife, and so there were no more kind words for his little daughter. Day after day the stepmother used to say that the little girl was too naughty to sit at table. And then she would throw her a crust and tell her to get out of the hut and go and eat it somewhere else.

And the poor little girl used to go away by herself into the shed in the yard, and wet the dry crust with her tears, and eat it all alone. Ah me! she often wept for the old days, and she often wept at the thought of the days that were to come.

Mostly she wept because she was all alone, until one day she found a little friend in the shed. She was hunched up in a corner of the shed, eating her crust and crying bitterly, when she heard a little noise. It was like this: scratch—scratch. It was just that, a little gray mouse who lived in a hole.

Out he came, his little pointed nose and his long whiskers, his little round ears and his bright eyes. Out came his little humpy body and his long tail. And then he sat up on his hind legs, and curled his tail twice round himself and looked at the little girl.

The little girl, who had a kind heart, forgot all her sorrows, and took a scrap of her crust and threw it to the little mouse. The mouseykin nibbled and nibbled, and there, it was gone, and he was looking for another. She gave him another bit, and presently that was gone, and another and another, until there was no crust left for the little girl. Well, she didn't mind that. You see, she was so happy seeing the little mouse nibbling and nibbling.

When the crust was done the mouseykin looks up at her with his little bright eyes, and "Thank you," he says, in a little squeaky voice. "Thank you," he says; "you are a kind little girl, and I am only a mouse, and I've eaten all your crust. But there is one thing I can do for you, and that is to tell you to take care. The old woman in the hut (and that was the cruel stepmother) is own sister to Baba Yaga, the bony-legged, the witch. So if ever she sends you on a message to your aunt, you come and tell me. For Baba Yaga would eat you soon enough with her iron teeth if you did not know what to do."

"Oh, thank you," said the little girl; and just then she heard the stepmother calling to her to come in and clean up the tea things, and tidy the house, and brush out the floor, and clean everybody's boots.

So off she had to go.

When she went in she had a good look at her stepmother, and sure enough she had a long nose, and she was as bony as a fish with all the flesh picked off, and the little girl thought of Baba Yaga and shivered, though she did not feel so bad when she remembered the mouseykin out there in the shed in the yard.

The very next morning it happened. The old man went off to pay a visit to some friends of his in the next village, just as I go off sometimes to see old Fedor, God be with him. And as soon as the old man was out of sight the wicked stepmother called the little girl.

"You are to go to-day to your dear little aunt in the forest," says she, "and ask her for a needle and thread to mend a shirt."

"But here is a needle and thread," says the little girl.

"Hold your tongue," says the stepmother, and she gnashes her teeth, and they make a noise like clattering tongs. "Hold your tongue," she says. "Didn't I tell you you are to go to-day to your dear little aunt to ask for a needle and thread to mend a shirt?"

"How shall I find her?" says the little girl, nearly ready to cry, for she knew that her aunt was Baba Yaga, the bony-legged, the witch.

The stepmother took hold of the little girl's nose and pinched it.

"That is your nose," she says. "Can you feel it?"

"Yes," says the poor little girl.

"You must go along the road into the forest till you come to a fallen tree; then you must turn to your left, and then follow your nose and you will find her," says the stepmother. "Now, be off with you, lazy one. Here is some food for you to eat by the way." She gave the little girl a bundle wrapped up in a towel.

The little girl wanted to go into the shed to tell the mouseykin she was going to Baba Yaga, and to ask what she should do. But she looked back, and there was the stepmother at the door watching her. So she had to go straight on.

She walked along the road through the forest till she came to the fallen tree. Then she turned to the left. Her nose was still hurting where the stepmother had pinched it, so she knew she had to go straight ahead. She was just setting out when she heard a little noise under the fallen tree. "Scratch—scratch."

And out jumped the little mouse, and sat up in the road in front of her.

"O mouseykin, mouseykin," says the little girl, "my stepmother has sent me to her sister. And that is Baba Yaga, the bony-legged, the witch, and I do not know what to do."

"It will not be difficult," says the little mouse, "because of your kind heart. Take all the things you find in the road, and do with them what you like. Then you will escape from Baba Yaga, and everything will be well."

"Are you hungry, mouseykin?" said the little girl.

"I could nibble, I think," says the little mouse.

The little girl unfastened the towel, and there was nothing in it but stones. That was what the stepmother had given the little girl to eat by the way.

"Oh, I'm so sorry," says the little girl. "There's nothing for you to eat."

"Isn't there?" said mouseykin, and as she looked at them the little girl saw the stones turn to bread and jam. The little girl sat down on the fallen tree, and the little mouse sat beside her, and they ate bread and jam until they were not hungry any more.

"Keep the towel," says the little mouse; "I think it will be useful. And remember what I said about the things you find on the way. And now good-bye," says he.

"Good-bye," says the little girl, and runs along.

As she was running along she found a nice new handkerchief lying in the road. She picked it up and took it with her. Then she found a little bottle of oil. She picked it up and took it with her. Then she found some scraps of meat.

"Perhaps I'd better take them too," she said; and she took them.

Then she found a gay blue ribbon, and she took that. Then she found a little loaf of good bread, and she took that too.

"I daresay somebody will like it," she said.

And then she came to the hut of Baba Yaga, the bony-legged, the witch. There was a high fence round it with big gates. When she pushed them open they squeaked miserably, as if it hurt them to move. The little girl was sorry for them.

"How lucky," she says, "that I picked up the bottle of oil!" and she poured the oil into the hinges of the gates.

Inside the railing was Baba Yaga's hut, and it stood on hen's legs and walked about the yard. And in the yard there was standing Baba Yaga's servant, and she was crying bitterly because of the tasks Baba Yaga set her to do. She was crying bitterly and wiping her eyes on her petticoat.

"How lucky," says the little girl, "that I picked up a handkerchief!" And she gave the handkerchief to Baba Yaga's servant, who wiped her eyes on it and smiled through her tears.

Close by the hut was a huge dog, very thin, gnawing a dry crust.

"How lucky," says the little girl, "that I picked up a loaf!" And she gave the loaf to the dog, and he gobbled it up and licked his lips.

The little girl went bravely up to the hut and knocked on the door.

"Come in," says Baba Yaga.

The little girl went in, and there was Baba Yaga, the bony-legged, the witch, sitting weaving at a loom. In a corner of the hut was a thin black cat watching a mouse-hole.

"Good-day to you, auntie," says the little girl, trying not to tremble.

"Good-day to you, niece," says Baba Yaga.

"My stepmother has sent me to you to ask for a needle and thread to mend a shirt."

"Very well," says Baba Yaga, smiling, and showing her iron teeth. "You sit down here at the loom, and go on with my weaving, while I go and get you the needle and thread."

The little girl sat down at the loom and began to weave.

Baba Yaga went out and called to her servant, "Go, make the bath hot and scrub my niece. Scrub her clean. I'll make a dainty meal of her."

The servant came in for the jug. The little girl begged her, "Be not too quick in making the fire, and carry the water in a sieve." The servant smiled, but said nothing, because she was afraid of Baba Yaga. But she took a very long time about getting the bath ready.

Baba Yaga came to the window and asked,—

"Are you weaving, little niece? Are you weaving, my pretty?"

"I am weaving, auntie," says the little girl.

When Baba Yaga went away from the window, the little girl spoke to the thin black cat who was watching the mouse-hole.

"What are you doing, thin black cat?"

"Watching for a mouse," says the thin black cat. "I haven't had any dinner for three days."

"How lucky," says the little girl, "that I picked up the scraps of meat!" And she gave them to the thin black cat. The thin black cat gobbled them up, and said to the little girl,—

"Little girl, do you want to get out of this?"

"Catkin dear," says the little girl, "I do want to get out of this, for Baba Yaga is going to eat me with her iron teeth."

"Well," says the cat, "I will help you."

Just then Baba Yaga came to the window.

"Are you weaving, little niece?" she asked. "Are you weaving, my pretty?"

"I am weaving, auntie," says the little girl, working away, while the loom went clickety clack, clickety clack.

Baba Yaga went away.

Says the thin black cat to the little girl: "You have a comb in your hair, and you have a towel. Take them and run for it while Baba Yaga is in the bath-house. When Baba Yaga chases after you, you must listen; and when she is close to you, throw away the towel, and it will turn into a big, wide river. It will take her a little time to get over that. But when she does, you must listen; and as soon as she is close to you throw away the comb, and it will sprout up into such a forest that she will never get through it at all."

"But she'll hear the loom stop," says the little girl.

"I'll see to that," says the thin black cat.

The cat took the little girl's place at the loom.

Clickety clack, clickety clack; the loom never stopped for a moment.

The little girl looked to see that Baba Yaga was in the bath-house, and then she jumped down from the little hut on hen's legs, and ran to the gates as fast as her legs could flicker.

The big dog leapt up to tear her to pieces. Just as he was going to spring on her he saw who she was.

"Why, this is the little girl who gave me the loaf," says he. "A good journey to you, little girl;" and he lay down again with his head between his paws.

When she came to the gates they opened quietly, quietly, without making any noise at all, because of the oil she had poured into their hinges.

Outside the gates there was a little birch tree that beat her in the eyes so that she could not go by.

"How lucky," says the little girl, "that I picked up the ribbon!" And she tied up the birch tree with the pretty blue ribbon. And the birch tree was so pleased with the ribbon that it stood still, admiring itself, and let the little girl go by.

How she did run!

Meanwhile the thin black cat sat at the loom. Clickety clack, clickety clack, sang the loom; but you never saw such a tangle as the tangle made by the thin black cat.

And presently Baba Yaga came to the window.

"Are you weaving, little niece?" she asked. "Are you weaving, my pretty?"

"I am weaving, auntie," says the thin black cat, tangling and tangling, while the loom went clickety clack, clickety clack.

"That's not the voice of my little dinner," says Baba Yaga, and she jumped into the hut, gnashing her iron teeth; and there was no little girl, but only the thin black cat, sitting at the loom, tangling and tangling the threads.

"Grr," says Baba Yaga, and jumps for the cat, and begins banging it about. "Why didn't you tear the little girl's eyes out?"

"In all the years I have served you," says the cat, "you have only given me one little bone; but the kind little girl gave me scraps of meat."

Baba Yaga threw the cat into a corner, and went out into the yard.

"Why didn't you squeak when she opened you?" she asked the gates.

"Why didn't you tear her to pieces?" she asked the dog.

"Why didn't you beat her in the face, and not let her go by?" she asked the birch tree.

"Why were you so long in getting the bath ready? If you had been quicker, she never would have got away," said Baba Yaga to the servant.

And she rushed about the yard, beating them all, and scolding at the top of her voice.

"Ah!" said the gates, "in all the years we have served you, you never even eased us with water; but the kind little girl poured good oil into our hinges."

"Ah!" said the dog, "in all the years I've served you, you never threw me anything but burnt crusts; but the kind little girl gave me a good loaf."

"Ah!" said the little birch tree, "in all the years I've served you, you never tied me up, even with thread; but the kind little girl tied me up with a gay blue ribbon."

"Ah!" said the servant, "in all the years I've served you, you have never given me even a rag; but the kind little girl gave me a pretty handkerchief."

Baba Yaga gnashed at them with her iron teeth. Then she jumped into the mortar and sat down. She drove it along with the pestle, and swept up her tracks with a besom, and flew off in pursuit of the little girl.

The little girl ran and ran. She put her ear to the ground and listened. Bang, bang, bangety bang! she could hear Baba Yaga beating the mortar with the pestle. Baba Yaga was quite close. There she was, beating with the pestle and sweeping with the besom, coming along the road.

As quickly as she could, the little girl took out the towel and threw it on the ground. And the towel grew bigger and bigger, and wetter and wetter, and there was a deep, broad river between Baba Yaga and the little girl.

The little girl turned and ran on. How she ran!

Baba Yaga came flying up in the mortar. But the mortar could not float in the river with Baba Yaga inside. She drove it in, but only got wet for her trouble. Tongs and pokers tumbling down a chimney are nothing to the noise she made as she gnashed her iron teeth. She turned home, and went flying back to the little hut on hen's legs. Then she got together all her cattle and drove them to the river. "Drink, drink!" she screamed at them; and the cattle drank up all the river to the last drop. And Baba Yaga, sitting in the mortar, drove it with the pestle, and swept up her tracks with the besom, and flew over the dry bed of the river and on in pursuit of the little girl.

The little girl put her ear to the ground and listened. Bang, bang, bangety bang! She could hear Baba Yaga beating the mortar with the pestle. Nearer and nearer came the noise, and there was Baba Yaga, beating with the pestle and sweeping with the besom, coming along the road close behind.

The little girl threw down the comb, and grew bigger and bigger, and its teeth sprouted up into a thick forest, thicker than this forest where we live—so thick that not even Baba Yaga could force her way through. And Baba Yaga, gnashing her teeth and screaming with rage and disappointment, turned round and drove away home to her little hut on hen's legs.

The little girl ran on home. She was afraid to go in and see her stepmother, so she ran into the shed. Scratch, scratch! Out came the little mouse.

"So you got away all right, my dear," says the little mouse. "Now run in. Don't be afraid. Your father is back, and you must tell him all about it."

The little girl went into the house.

"Where have you been?" says her father; "and why are you so out of breath?"

The stepmother turned yellow when she saw her, and her eyes glowed, and her teeth ground together until they broke.

But the little girl was not afraid, and she went to her father and climbed on his knee, and told him everything just as it had happened.

And when the old man knew that the stepmother had sent his little daughter to be eaten by Baba Yaga, he was so angry that he drove her out of the hut, and ever afterwards lived alone with the little girl. Much better it was for both of them.

"And the little mouse?" said Ivan.

"The little mouse," said old Peter, "came and lived in the hut, and every day it used to sit up on the table and eat crumbs, and warm its paws on the little girl's glass of tea."

"Tell us a story about a cat, please, grandfather," said Vanya, who was sitting with Vladimir curled up in his arms.

"The story of a very happy cat," said Maroosia; and then, scratching Bayan's nose, she added, "and afterwards a story about a dog."

"I'll tell you the story of a very unhappy cat who became very happy," said old Peter. "I'll tell you the story of the Cat who became Head-forester."

Old Peter's Russian Tales
by Arthur Ransome

Sadko

In Novgorod in the old days there was a young man—just a boy he was—the son of a rich merchant who had lost all his money and died. So Sadko was very poor. He had not a kopeck in the world, except what the people gave him when he played his dulcimer for their dancing. He had blue eyes and curling hair, and he was strong, and would have been merry; but it is dull work playing for other folk to dance, and Sadko dared not dance with any young girl, for he had no money to marry on, and he did not want to be chased away as a beggar. And the young women of Novgorod, they never looked at the handsome Sadko. No; they smiled with their bright eyes at the young men who danced with them, and if they ever spoke to Sadko, it was just to tell him sharply to keep the music going or to play faster.

So Sadko lived alone with his dulcimer, and made do with half a loaf when he could not get a whole, and with crust when he had no crumb. He did not mind so very much what came to him, so long as he could play his dulcimer and walk along the banks of the littleiver Volkhov that flows by Novgorod, or on the shores of the lake, making music for himself, and seeing the pale mists rise over the water, and dawn or sunset across the shining river.

"There is no girl in all Novgorod as pretty as my little river," he used to say, and night after night he would sit by the banks of the river or on the shores of the lake, playing the dulcimer and singing to himself.

Sometimes he helped the fishermen on the lake, and they would give him a little fish for his supper in payment for his strong young arms.

And it happened that one evening the fishermen asked him to watch their nets for them on the shore, while they went off to take their fish to sell them in the square at Novgorod.

The Volkhov would be a big river if it were in England, and Sadko and old Peter called it little only because they loved it.

Sadko sat on the shore, on a rock, and played his dulcimer and sang. Very sweetly he sang of the fair lake and the lovely river—the little river that he thought prettier than all the girls of Novgorod. And while he was singing he saw a whirlpool in the lake, little waves flying from it across the water, and in the middle a hollow down into the water. And in the hollow he saw the head of a great man with blue hair and a gold crown. He knew that the huge man was the Tzar of the Sea. And the man came nearer, walking up out of the depths of the lake—a huge, great man, a very giant, with blue hair falling to his waist over his broad shoulders. The little waves ran from him in all directions as he came striding up out of the water.

Sadko did not know whether to run or stay; but the Tzar of the Sea called out to him in a great voice like wind and water in a storm,—

"Sadko of Novgorod, you have played and sung many days by the side of this lake and on the banks of the little river Volkhov. My daughters love your music, and it has pleased me too. Throw out a net into the water, and draw it in, and the waters will pay you for your singing. And if you are satisfied with the payment, you must come and play to us down in the green palace of the sea."

With that the Tzar of the Sea went down again into the waters of the lake. The waves closed over him with a roar, and presently the lake was as smooth and calm as it had ever been.

Sadko thought, and said to himself: "Well, there is no harm done in casting out a net." So he threw a net out into the lake.

He sat down again and played on his dulcimer and sang, and when he had finished his singing the dusk had fallen and the moon shone over the lake. He put down his dulcimer and took hold of the ropes of the net, and began to draw it up out of the silver water. Easily the ropes came, and the net, dripping and glittering in the moonlight.

"I was dreaming," said Sadko; "I was asleep when I saw the Tzar of the Sea, and there is nothing in the net at all."

And then, just as the last of the net was coming ashore, he saw something in it, square and dark. He dragged it out, and found it was a coffer. He opened the coffer, and it was full of precious stones—green, red, gold—gleaming in the light of the moon. Diamonds shone there like little bundles of sharp knives.

"There can be no harm in taking these stones," says Sadko, "whether I dreamed or not."

He took the coffer on his shoulder, and bent under the weight of it, strong though he was. He put it in a safe place. All night he sat and watched by the nets, and played and sang, and planned what he would do.

In the morning the fishermen came, laughing and merry after their night in Novgorod, and they gave him a little fish for watching their nets; and he made a fire on the shore, and cooked it and ate it as he used to do.

"And that is my last meal as a poor man," says Sadko. "Ah me! who knows if I shall be happier?"

Then he set the coffer on his shoulder and tramped away for Novgorod.

"Who is that?" they asked at the gates.

"Only Sadko the dulcimer player," he replied.

"Turned porter?" said they.

"One trade is as good as another," said Sadko, and he walked into the city. He sold a few of the stones, two at a time, and with what he got for them he set up a booth in the market. Small things led to great, and he was soon one of the richest traders in Novgorod.

And now there was not a girl in the town who could look too sweetly at Sadko. "He has golden hair," says one. "Blue eyes like the sea," says another. "He could lift the world on his shoulders," says a third. A little money, you see, opens everybody's eyes.

But Sadko was not changed by his good fortune. Still he walked and played by the little river Volkhov. When work was done and the traders gone, Sadko would take his dulcimer and play and sing on the banks of the river. And still he said, "There is no girl in all Novgorod as pretty as my little river." Every time he came back from his long voyages—for he was trading far and near, like the greatest of merchants—he went at once to the banks of the river to see how his sweetheart fared. And always he brought some little present for her and threw it into the waves. For twelve years he lived unmarried in Novgorod, and every year made voyages, buying and selling, and always growing richer and richer. Many were the mothers in Novgorod who would have liked to see him married to their daughters. Many were the pillows that were wet with the tears of the young girls, as they thought of the blue eyes of Sadko and his golden hair.

And then, in the twelfth year since he walked into Novgorod with the coffer on his shoulder, he was sailing in a ship on the Caspian Sea, far, far away. For many days the ship sailed on, and Sadko sat on deck and played his dulcimer and sang of Novgorod and of the little river Volkhov that flows under the walls of the town. Blue was the Caspian Sea, and the waves were like furrows in a field, long lines of white under the steady wind, while the sails swelled and the ship shot over the water.

And suddenly the ship stopped.

In the middle of the sea, far from land, the ship stopped and trembled in the waves, as if she were held by a big hand.

"We are aground!" cry the sailors; and the captain, the great one, tells them to take soundings. Seventy fathoms by the bow it was, and seventy fathoms by the stern.

"We are not aground," says the captain, "unless there is a rock sticking up like a needle in the middle of the Caspian Sea!"

"There is magic in this," say the sailors.

"Hoist more sail," says the captain; and up go the white sails, swelling out in the wind, while the masts bend and creak. But still the ship lay shivering and did not move, out there in the middle of the sea.

"Hoist more sail yet," says the captain; and up go the white sails, swelling and tugging, while the masts creak and groan. But still the ship lay there shivering and did not move.

"There is an unlucky one aboard," says an old sailor. "We must draw lots and find him, and throw him overboard into the sea."

The other sailors agreed to this. And still Sadko sat, and played his dulcimer and sang.

The sailors cut pieces of string, all of a length, as many as there were souls in the ship, and one of those strings they cut in half. Then they made them into a bundle, and each man plucked one string. And Sadko stopped his playing for a moment to pluck a string, and his was the string that had been cut in half.

"Magician, sorcerer, unclean one!" shouted the sailors.

"Not so," said Sadko. "I remember now an old promise I made, and I keep it willingly."

He took his dulcimer in his hand, and leapt from the ship into the blue Caspian Sea. The waves had scarcely closed over his head before the ship shot forward again, and flew over the waves like a swan's feather, and came in the end safely to her harbour.

"And what happened to Sadko?" asked Maroosia.

"You shall hear, little pigeon," said old Peter, and he took a pinch of snuff. Then he went on. Sadko dropped into the waves, and the waves closed over him. Down he sank, like a pebble thrown into a pool, down and down. First the water was blue, then green, and strange fish with goggle eyes and golden fins swam round him as he sank. He came at last to the bottom of the sea.

And there, on the bottom of the sea, was a palace built of green wood. Yes, all the timbers of all the ships that have been wrecked in all the seas of the world are in that palace, and they are all green, and cunningly fitted together, so that the palace is worth a ten days' journey only to see it. And in front of the palace Sadko saw two big kobbly sturgeons, each a hundred and fifty feet long, lashing their tails and guarding the gates. Now, sturgeons are the oldest of all fish, and these were the oldest of all sturgeons.

Sadko walked between the sturgeons and through the gates of the palace. Inside there was a great hall, and the Tzar of the Sea lay resting in the hall, with his gold crown on his head and his blue hair floating round him in the water, and his great body covered with scales lying along the hall. The Tzar of the Sea filled the hall—and there is room in that hall for a village. And there were fish swimming this way and that in and out of the windows.

"Ah, Sadko," says the Tzar of the Sea, "you took what the sea gave you, but you have been a long time in coming to sing in the palaces of the sea. Twelve years I have lain here waiting for you."

"Great Tzar, forgive," says Sadko.

"Sing now," says the Tzar of the Sea, and his voice was like the beating of waves.

And Sadko played on his dulcimer and sang.

He sang of Novgorod and of the little river Volkhov which he loved. It was in his song that none of the girls of Novgorod were as pretty as the little river. And there was the sound of wind over the lake in his song, the sound of ripples under the prow of a boat, the sound of ripples on the shore, the sound of the river flowing past the tall reeds, the whispering sound of the river at night. And all the time he played cunningly on the dulcimer. The girls of Novgorod had never danced to so sweet a tune when in the old days Sadko played his dulcimer to earn kopecks and crusts of bread.

Never had the Tzar of the Sea heard such music.

"I would dance," said the Tzar of the Sea, and he stood up like a tall tree in the hall.

"Play on," said the Tzar of the Sea, and he strode through the gates. The sturgeons guarding the gates stirred the water with their tails.

And if the Tzar of the Sea was huge in the hall, he was huger still when he stood outside on the bottom of the sea. He grew taller and taller, towering like a mountain. His feet were like small hills. His blue hair hung down to his waist, and he was covered with green scales. And he began to dance on the bottom of the sea.

Great was that dancing. The sea boiled, and ships went down. The waves rolled as big as houses. The sea overflowed its shores, and whole towns were under water as the Tzar danced mightily on the bottom of the sea. Hither and thither rushed the waves, and the very earth shook at the dancing of that tremendous Tzar.

He danced till he was tired, and then he came back to the palace of green wood, and passed the sturgeons, and shrank into himself and came through the gates into the hall, where Sadko still played on his dulcimer and sang.

"You have played well and given me pleasure," says the Tzar of the Sea. "I have thirty daughters, and you shall choose one and marry her, and be a Prince of the Sea."

"Better than all maidens I love my little river," says Sadko; and the Tzar of the Sea laughed and threw his head back, with his blue hair floating all over the hall.

And then there came in the thirty daughters of the Tzar of the Sea. Beautiful they were, lovely, and graceful; but twenty-nine of them passed by, and Sadko fingered his dulcimer and thought of his little river.

There came in the thirtieth, and Sadko cried out aloud. "Here is the only maiden in the world as pretty as my little river!" says he. And she looked at him with eyes that shone like stars reflected in the river. Her hair was dark, like the river at night. She laughed, and her voice was like the flowing of the river.

"And what is the name of your little river?" says the Tzar.

"It is the little river Volkhov that flows by Novgorod," says Sadko; "but your daughter is as fair as the little river, and I would gladly marry her if she will have me."

"It is a strange thing," says the Tzar, "but Volkhov is the name of my youngest daughter."

He put Sadko's hand in the hand of his youngest daughter, and they kissed each other. And as they kissed, Sadko saw a necklace round her neck, and knew it for one he had thrown into the river as a present for his sweetheart.

She smiled, and "Come!" says she, and took him away to a palace of her own, and showed him a coffer; and in that coffer were bracelets and rings and earrings—all the gifts that he had thrown into the river.

And Sadko laughed for joy, and kissed the youngest daughter of the Tzar of the Sea, and she kissed him back.

"O my little river!" says he; "there is no girl in all the world but thou as pretty as my little river."

Well, they were married, and the Tzar of the Sea laughed at the wedding feast till the palace shook and the fish swam off in all directions.

And after the feast Sadko and his bride went off together to her palace. And before they slept she kissed him very tenderly, and she said,—

"O Sadko, you will not forget me? You will play to me sometimes, and sing?"

"I shall never lose sight of you, my pretty one," says he; "and as for music, I will sing and play all the day long."

"That's as may be," says she, and they fell asleep.

And in the middle of the night Sadko happened to turn in bed, and he touched the Princess with his left foot, and she was cold, cold, cold as ice in January. And with that touch of cold he woke, and he was lying under the walls of Novgorod, with his dulcimer in his hand, and one of his feet was in the little river Volkhov, and the moon was shining.

"O grandfather! And what happened to him after that?" asked Maroosia.

"There are many tales," said old Peter. "Some say he went into the town, and lived on alone until he died. But I think with those who say that he took his dulcimer and swam out into the middle of the river, and sank under water again, looking for his little Princess. They say he found her, and lives still in the green palaces of the bottom of the sea; and when there is a big storm, you may know that Sadko is playing on his dulcimer and singing, and that the Tzar of the Sea is dancing his tremendous dance down there, on the bottom, under the waves."

"Yes, I expect that's what happened," said Ivan. "He'd have found it very dull in Novgorod, even though it is a big town."

Old Peter’s Russian Tales
by Arthur Ransome

The Christening in the Village

This chapter is not one of old Peter's stories, though there are, doubtless, some stories in it. It tells how Vanya and Maroosia drove to the village to see a new baby.

Old Peter had a sister who lived in the village not so very far away from the forest. And she had a plump daughter, and the daughter was called Nastasia, and she was married to a handsome peasant called Sergie, who had three cows, a lot of pigs, and a flock of fat geese. And one day when old Peter had gone to the village to buy tobacco and sugar and sunflower seeds, he came back in the evening, and said to the children,—

"There's something new in the village."

"What sort of a something?" asked Vanya.

"Alive," said old Peter.

"Is there a lot of it?" asked Vanya.
"No, only one."

"Then it can't be pigs," said Vanya, in a melancholy voice. "I thought it was pigs."

"Perhaps it is a little calf," said Maroosia.

"I know what it is," said Vanya.

"Well?"

"It's a foal. It's brown all over with white on its nose, and a lot of white hairs in its tail."

"No."

"What is it then, grandfather?"

"I'll tell you, little pigeons. It's small and red, and it's got a bumpy head with hair on it like the fluff of a duckling. It has blue eyes, and ten fingers to its fore paws, and ten toes to its hind feet—five to each."

"It's a baby," said Maroosia.

"Yes. Nastasia has got a little son, Aunt Sofia has got a grandson, you have got a new cousin, and I have got a new great-nephew. Think of that! Already it's a son, and a cousin, and a grandson, and a great-nephew, and he's only been alive twelve hours. He lost no time in taking a position for himself. He'll be a great man one of these days if he goes on as fast as that."

The children had jumped up as soon as they knew it was a baby.

"When is the christening?"

"The day after to-morrow."

"O grandfather!"

"Well?"

"Who is going to the christening?"

"The baby, of course."

"Yes; but other people?"

"All the village."

"And us?"

"I have to go, and I suppose there'll be room in the cart for two little bear cubs like you."

And so it was settled that Vanya and Maroosia were to go to the christening of their new cousin, who was only twelve hours old. All the next day they could think of nothing else, and early on the morning of the christening they were up and about, Maroosia seeing that Vanya had on a clean shirt, and herself putting a green ribbon in her hair. The sun shone, and the leaves on the trees were all new and bright, and the sky was pale blue through the flickering green leaves.

Old Peter was up early too, harnessing the little yellow horse into the old cart. The cart was of rough wood, without springs, like a big box fixed on long larch poles between two pairs of wheels. The larch pole did instead of springs, bending and creaking, as the cart moved over the forest track. The shafts came from the front wheels upwards to the horse's shoulders, and between the ends of them there was a tall strong hoop of wood, called a douga, which rose high over the shoulders of the horse, above his collar, and had two little bells hanging from it at the top. The wooden hoop was painted green with little red flowers. The harness was mostly of ropes, but that did not matter so long as it held together. The horse had a long tail and mane, and looked as untidy as a little boy; but he had a green ribbon in his forelock in honour of the christening, and he could go like anything, and never got tired.

When all was ready, old Peter arranged a lot of soft fresh hay in the cart for the children to sit in. Hay is the best thing in the world to sit in when you drive in a jolting Russian cart.

Old Peter put in a tremendous lot, so that the horse could eat some of it while waiting in the village, and yet leave them enough to make them comfortable on the journey back. Finally, old Peter took a gun that he had spent all the evening before in cleaning, and laid it carefully in the hay.

"What is the gun for?" asked Vanya.

"I am to be a godparent," said old Peter, "and I want to give him a present. I could not give him a better present than a gun, for he shall be a forester, and a good shot, and you cannot begin too early."

Presently Vanya and Maroosia were tucked into the hay, and old Peter climbed in with the plaited reins, and away they went along the narrow forest track, where the wheels followed the ruts and splashed through the deep holes; for the spring was young, and the roads had not yet dried. Some of the deepest holes had a few pine branches laid in them, but that was the only road-mending that ever was done. Overhead were the tall firs and silver birches with their little pale round leaves; and somewhere, not far away, a cuckoo was calling, while the murmur of the wild pigeons never stopped for a moment.

They drove on and on through the forest, and at last came out from among the trees into the open country, a broad, flat plain stretching to the river. Far away they could see the big square sail of a boat, swelled out in the light wind, and they knew that there was the river, on the banks of which stood the village. They could see a small clump of trees, and, as they came nearer, the pale green cupolas of the white village church rising above the tops of the birches.

Presently they came to a rough wooden bridge, and crossed over a little stream that was on its way to join the big river.

Vanya looked at it.

"Grandfather," he asked, "when the frost went, which was water first—the big river or the little river?"
"Why, the little river, of course," said old Peter. "It's always the little streams that wake first in the spring, and running down to the big river make it swell and flood and break up the ice. It's always been so ever since the quarrel between the Vazouza and the Volga."

"What was that?" said Vanya.

"It was like this," said old Peter.

The Vazouza and the Volga flow for a long way side by side, and then they join and flow together. And the Vazouza is a little river; but the Volga is the mother of all Russia, and the greatest river in the world.

And the little Vazouza was jealous of the Volga.

"You are big and noisy," she says to the Volga, "and terribly strong; but as for brains," says she, "why, I have more brains in a single ripple than you in all that lump of water."

Of course the Volga told her not to be so rude, and said that little rivers should know their place and not argue with the great.

But the Vazouza would not keep quiet, and at last she said to the Volga: "Look here, we will lie down and sleep, and we will agree that the one of us who wakes first and comes first to the sea is the wiser of the two."

And the Volga said, "Very well, if only you will stop talking."

So the little Vazouza and the big Volga lay and slept, white and still, all through the winter. And when the spring came, the little Vazouza woke first, brisk and laughing and hurrying, and rushed away as hard as she could go towards the sea. When the Volga woke the little Vazouza was already far ahead. But the Volga did not hurry. She woke slowly and shook the ice from herself, and then came roaring after the Vazouza, a huge foaming flood of angry water.

And the little Vazouza listened as she ran, and she heard the Volga coming after her; and when the Volga caught her up—a tremendous foaming river, whirling along trees and blocks of ice—she was frightened, and she said,—

"O Volga, let me be your little sister. I will never argue with you any more. You are wiser than I and stronger than I. Only take me by the hand and bring me with you to the sea."

And the Volga forgave the little Vazouza, and took her by the hand and brought her safely to the sea. And they have never quarrelled again. But all the same, it is always the little Vazouza that gets up first in the spring, and tugs at the white blankets of ice and snow, and wakes her big sister from her winter sleep.

They drove on over the flat open country, with no hedges, but only ditches to drain off the floods, and very often not even ditches to divide one field from another. And huge crows, with gray hoods and shawls, pecked about in the grass at the roadside or flew heavily in the sunshine. They passed a little girl with a flock of geese, and another little girl lying in the grass holding a long rope which was fastened to the horns of a brown cow. And the little girl lay on her face and slept among the flowers, while the cow walked slowly round her, step by step, chewing the grass and thinking about nothing at all.

And at last they came to the village, where the road was wider; and instead of one pair of ruts there were dozens, and the cart bumped worse than ever. The broad earthy road had no stones in it; and in places where the puddles would have been deeper than the axles of the wheels, it had been mended by laying down fir logs and small branches in the puddles, and putting a few spadefuls of earth on the top of them.

The road ran right through the village. On either side of it were little wooden huts. The ends of the timbers crossed outside at the four corners of the huts. They fitted neatly into each other, and some of them were carved. And there were no slates or tiles on the roofs, but little thin slips of wood overlapping each other. There was not a single stone hut or cottage in the village. Only the church was partly brick, whitewashed, with bright green cupolas up in the air, and thin gold crosses on the tops of the cupolas, shining in the clear sky.

Outside the church were rows of short posts, with long rough fir timbers nailed on the top of them, to which the country people tied their horses when they came to church. There were several carts there already, with bright-coloured rugs lying on the hay in them; and the horses were eating hay or biting the logs. Always, except when the logs are quite new, you can tell the favourite places for tying up horses to them, because the timbers will have deep holes in them, where they have been gnawed away by the horses' teeth. They bite the timbers, while their masters eat sunflower seeds, not for food, but to pass the time.

"Now then," said old Peter, as he got down from the cart, tied the horse, gave him an armful of hay from the cart, and lifted the children out. "Be quick. We shall be late if we don't take care. I believe we are late already.—Good health to you, Fedor," he said to an old peasant; "and has the baby gone in?"

"He has, Peter. And my health is not so bad; and how is yours?"

"Good also, Fedor, thanks be to God. And will you see to these two? for I am a god-parent, and must be near the priest."

"Willingly," said the old peasant Fedor. "How they do grow, to be sure, like young birch trees. Come along then, little pigeons."

Old Peter hurried into the church, followed by Fedor with Vanya and Maroosia. They all crossed themselves and said a prayer as they went in.

The ceremony was just beginning.

The priest, in his silk robes, was standing before the gold and painted screen at the end of the church, and there were the basin of holy water, and old Peter's sister, and the nurse Babka Tanya, very proud, holding the baby in a roll of white linen, and rocking it to and fro. There were coloured pictures of saints all over the screen, which stretches from one side of the church to the other. Some of the pictures were framed in gilt frames under glass, and were partly painted and partly metal. The faces and hands of the saints were painted, and their clothes were glittering silver or gold. Little lamps were burning in front of them, and candles.

A Russian christening is very different from an English one. For one thing, the baby goes right into the water, not once, but three times. Babka Tanya unrolled the baby, and the priest covered its face with his hand, and down it went under the water, once, twice, and again. Then he took some of the sacred ointment on his finger and anointed the baby's forehead, and feet, and hands, and little round stomach. Then, with a pair of scissors, he cut a little pinch of fluff from the baby's head, and rolled it into a pellet with the ointment, and threw the pellet into the holy water. And after that the baby was carried solemnly three times round the holy water. The priest blessed it and prayed for it; and there it was, a little true Russian, ready to be carried back to its mother, Nastasia, who lay at home in her cottage waiting for it.

When they got outside the church, they all went to Nastasia's cottage to congratulate her on her baby, and to tell her what good lungs it had, and what a handsome face, and how it was exactly like its father.

Nastasia smiled at Vanya and Maroosia; but they had no eyes except for the baby, and for all that belonged to it, especially its cradle. Now a Russian baby has a very much finer cradle than an English baby. A long fir pole is fastened in the middle and at one end to the beams in the ceiling of the hut, so that the other end swings free, just below the rafters. From this end is hung a big basket, and on the ropes by which the basket hangs are fastened shawls of bright colours. The baby is tucked in the basket, the shawls closed round it; and as the mother or the nurse sits at her spinning, she just kicks the basket gently now and again, and it swings up and down from the end of the pole, as if it were hung from the branch of a tree.

This baby had a fine new basket and a larch pole, newly fixed, white and shining, under the dark beams of the ceiling. It had presents besides old Peter's gun. It had a fine wooden spoon with a picture on it of a cottage and a fish. It had a wooden bowl and a painted mug, bought from one of the peddling barges that go up and down the rivers selling chairs and crockery, just like the caravans that travel our English roads. And also, although it was so young, it had a little sacred picture, made of metal, a picture of St. Nikolai; because this was St. Nikolai's day, and the baby was called Nikolai.

There was a samovar already steaming in the cottage, and a great cake of pastry, and cabbage and egg and fish. And there were cabbage soup with sour cream, and black bread and a little white bread, and red kisel jelly and a huge jug of milk.

And everybody ate and drank and talked as if they were never going to stop. The sun was warm, and presently the men went outside and sat on a log, leaning their backs against the wall of the hut and making cigarettes and smoking, or eating sunflower seeds, cracking the husks with their teeth, taking out the white kernels, and blowing the husks away. And the women sat in the hut, and now and then brought out glasses of hot tea to the men, and then went back again to talk of what a fine man the baby would be, and to remember other babies. And the old women looked at the young mothers and laughed, and said that they could remember the days when they were christened—when they were babies themselves, no bigger than the little Nikolai who swung in the basket and squalled, or slept proudly, just as if he knew that all the world belonged to him because he was so very young. And Vanya and Maroosia ate sunflower seeds too, and sometimes played outside the cottage and sometimes inside; but mostly stood very quiet close to the swinging cradle, waiting till old Babka Tanya, the nurse, should pull the shawls a little way aside and let them see the pink, crumpled face of the little Nikolai, and the yellow fluff, just like a duckling's, which covered his bumpy pink head.

At last, towards evening, old Peter packed what was left of the hay into the cart, and packed Vanya and Maroosia in with the hay. Everybody said good-byes all round, and Peter climbed in and took up the rope reins.

"He'll be a fine man," he shouted through the door to Nastasia, "a fine man; and God grant he'll be as healthy as he is good.—Till we meet again," he cried out merrily to the villagers; and Vanya and Maroosia waved their hands, and off they drove, back again to the hut in the forest.

They were very much quieter on the way back than they had been when they drove to the village in the morning. And the early summer day was quiet as it came to its end.

There was a corncrake rattling in the fields, and more than once they saw frogs hop out of the road as they drove by in the twilight. A hare ran before them through the dusk and disappeared. And when they came to the wooden bridge over the stream, a tall gray bird with a long beak rose up from the bank and flew slowly away, carrying his long legs, like a thin pair of crutches, straight out behind him.

"Who is that?" asked Vanya sleepily from his nest in the hay.

"That is Mr. Crane," said old Peter. "Perhaps he is on his way to visit Miss Heron and tell her that this time he has really made up his mind, and to ask her to let bygones be bygones."

"What bygones?" said Vanya.

Old Peter watched the crane's slow, steady flight above the low marshy ground on either side of the stream, and then he said,—

"Why, surely you know all about that. It is an old story, little one, and I must have told it you a dozen times."

"No, never, grandfather," said Maroosia. She was nearly as sleepy as Vanya after the day in the village, and the fuss and pleasure of the christening.

"Oh, well," said old Peter; and he told the tale of Mr. Crane and Miss Heron as the cart bumped slowly along the rough road, while Vanya and Maroosia looked out with sleepy eyes from their nest of hay and listened, and the sky turned green, and the trees grew dim, and the frogs croaked in the ditches.

Mr. Crane and Miss Heron lived in a marsh five miles across from end to end. They lived there, and fed on the frogs which they caught in their long bills, and held up in the air for a moment, and then swallowed, standing on one leg. The marsh was always damp, and there were always plenty of frogs, and life went well for them, except that they saw very little company. They had no one to pass the time of day with. For Mr. Crane had built his little hut on one side of the marsh, and Miss Heron had built hers on the other.

So it came into the head of Mr. Crane that it was dull work living alone. If only I were married, he thought, there would be two of us to drink our tea beside the samovar at night, and I should not spend my evenings in melancholy, thinking only of frogs. I will go to see Miss Heron, and I will offer to marry her.

So off he flew to the other side of the marsh, flap, flap, with his legs hanging out behind, just as we saw him to-night. He came to the other side of the marsh, and flew down to the hut of Miss Heron. He tapped on the door with his long beak.

"Is Miss Heron at home?"

"At home," said Miss Heron.

"Will you marry me?" said Mr. Crane.

"Of course I won't," said Miss Heron; "your legs are long and ill-shaped, and your coat is short, and you fly awkwardly, and you are not even rich. You would have no dainties to feed me with. Off with you, long-bodied one, and don't come bothering me."

She shut the door in his face.

Mr. Crane looked the fool he thought himself, and went off home, wishing he had never made the journey.

But as soon as he was gone, Miss Heron, sitting alone in her hut, began to think things over and to be sorry she had spoken in such a hurry.

"After all," thinks she, "it is poor work living alone. And Mr. Crane, in spite of what I said about his looks, is really a handsome enough young fellow. Indeed at evening, when he stands on one leg, he is very handsome indeed. Yes, I will go and marry him."

So off flew Miss Heron, flap, flap, over five miles of marsh, and came to the hut of Mr. Crane.
"Is the master at home?"

"At home," said Mr. Crane.

"Ah, Mr. Crane," said Miss Heron, "I was chaffing you just now. When shall we be married?"

"No, Miss Heron," said Mr. Crane; "I have no need of you at all. I do not wish to marry, and I would not take you for my wife even if I did. Clear out, and let me see the last of you." He shut the door.

Miss Heron wept tears of shame, that ran from her eyes down her long bill and dropped one by one to the ground. Then she flew away home, wishing she had not come.

As soon as she was gone Mr. Crane began to think, and he said to himself, "What a fool I was to be so short with Miss Heron! It's dull living alone. Since she wants it, I will marry her." And he flew off after Miss Heron. He came to her hut, and told her,—

"Miss Heron, I have thought things over. I have decided to marry you."

"Mr. Crane," said Miss Heron, "I, too, have thought things over. I would not marry you, not for ten thousand young frogs."

Off flew Mr. Crane.

As soon as he was gone Miss Heron thought, "Why didn't I agree to marry Mr. Crane? It's dull alone. I will go at once and tell him I have changed my mind."

She flew off to betroth herself; but Mr. Crane would have none of her, and she flew back again.

And so they go on to this day—first one and then the other flying across the marsh with an offer of marriage, and flying back with shame. They have never married, and never will.

"Grandfather," whispered Maroosia, tugging at old Peter's sleeve, "Vanya is asleep."

They drove on through the forest silently, except for the creaking of the cart and the loud singing of the nightingales in the tops of the tall firs. They came at last to their hut.

"Ah!" said old Peter, as he lifted them out, first one and then the other; "it isn't only Vanya who's asleep." And he carried them in, and put them to bed without waking them.

The Russian Garland

by Robert Steele

The Story of Ivan the Peasant's Son

In a certain village there lived a poor peasant with his wife, who for three years had no children: at length the good woman had a little son, whom they named Ivan. The boy grew, but even when he was five years old, could not walk. His father and mother were very sad, and prayed that their son might be strong on his feet; but, however many their prayers, he had to sit, and could not use his feet for three-and-thirty years long.

One day the peasant went with his wife to church; and whilst they were away, a beggar man came to the window of the cottage and begged alms of Ivan the peasant's son. And Ivan said to him: "I would gladly give you something, but I cannot rise from my stool." Then said the beggar: "Stand up and give me alms! Your feet are stout and strong!" In an instant Ivan rose up from his stool, and was overjoyed at his newly acquired power: he called the man into the cottage and gave him food to eat. Then the beggar asked for a draught of beer, and Ivan instantly went and fetched it; the beggar, however, did not drink it, but bade Ivan empty the flask himself, which he did to the very bottom. Then the beggar said: "Tell me, Ivanushka, how strong do you feel?" "Very strong," replied Ivan. "Then fare you well!" said the beggar; and disappeared, leaving Ivan standing lost in amazement.

In a short time his father and mother came home, and when they saw their son healed of his weakness, they were astonished, and asked him how it had happened. Then Ivan told them all, and the old folk thought it must have been no beggar but a holy man who had cured him; and they feasted for joy and made merry.

Presently Ivan went out to make a trial of his strength; and going into the kitchen garden, he seized a pole and stuck it half its length into the ground, and turned it with such strength that the whole village turned round. Then he went back into the cottage to take leave of his parents and ask their blessing. The old folk fell to weeping bitterly when he spoke of leaving them, and entreated him to stay at least a little longer; but Ivan heeded not their tears, and said: "If you will not give me your consent, I shall go without it." So his parents gave him their blessing; and Ivan prayed, bowing himself to all four sides, and then took leave of his father and mother. Thereupon he went straight out of the yard, and followed his eyes, and wandered for ten days and ten nights until at length he came to a large kingdom. He had scarcely entered the city when a great noise and outcry arose; whereat the Tsar was so frightened that he ordered a proclamation to be made, that whoever appeased the tumult should have his daughter for wife, and half his kingdom with her.

When Ivanushka heard this he went to the Court and desired the Tsar to be informed that he was ready to appease the tumult. So the doorkeeper went straight and told the Tsar, who ordered Ivan the peasant's son to be called. And the Tsar said to him: "My friend, is what you have said to the doorkeeper true?"

"Quite true," replied Ivan; "but I ask for no other reward than that your Majesty gives me whatever is the cause of the noise." At this the Tsar laughed, and said: "Take it by all means, if it is of any use to you." So Ivan the peasant's son made his bow to the Tsar and took his leave.

Then Ivan went to the doorkeeper and demanded of him a hundred workmen, who were instantly given him; and Ivan ordered them to dig a hole in front of the palace. And when the men had thrown up the earth, they saw an iron door, with a copper ring. So Ivan lifted up this door with one hand, and beheld a steed fully caparisoned, and a suit of knightly armour. When the horse perceived Ivan, he fell on his knees before him, and said with a human voice: "Ah, thou brave youth! Ivan the peasant's son! the famous knight Lukopero placed me here; and for three-and-thirty years have I been impatiently awaiting you. Seat yourself on my back, and ride whithersoever you will: I will serve you faithfully, as I once served the brave Lukopero."

Ivan saddled his good steed, gave him a bridle of embroidered ribands, put a Tcherkess saddle on his back, and buckled ten rich silken girths around him. Then he vaulted into the saddle, struck him on the flank, and the horse chafed at the bit, and rose from the ground higher than the forest; he left hill and dale swiftly under his feet, covered large rivers with his tail, sent forth a thick steam from his ears, and flames from his nostrils.

At length Ivan the peasant's son came to an unknown country, and rode through it for thirty days and thirty nights, until at length he arrived at the Chinese Empire. There he dismounted, and turned his good steed out into the open fields, while he went into the city and bought himself a bladder, drew it over his head, and went round the Tsar's palace. Then the folks asked him whence he came, and what kind of man he was, and what were his father and mother's names. But Ivan only replied to their questions, "I don't know." So they all took him for a fool, and went and told the Chinese Tsar about him. Then the Tsar ordered Ivan to be called, and asked where he came from and what was his name; but he only answered as before, "I don't know." So the Tsar ordered him to be driven out of the Court. But it happened that there was a gardener in the crowd, who begged the Tsar to give the fool over to him that he might employ him in gardening. The Tsar consented, and the man took Ivan into the garden, and set him to weed the beds whilst he went his way.

Then Ivan lay down under a tree and fell fast asleep. In the night he awoke, and broke down all the trees in the garden. Early the next morning the gardener came and looked round, and was terrified at what he beheld: so he went to Ivan the peasant's son and fell to abusing him, and asked him who had destroyed all the trees. But Ivan only replied, "I don't know."

Ivan did not sleep the next night, but went and drew water from the well, and watered the broken trees; and early in the morning they began to rise and grow; and when the sun rose they were all covered with leaves, and were even finer than ever. When the gardener came into the garden he was amazed at the change; but he did not again ask Know-nothing any questions, as he never returned an answer. And when the Tsar's daughter awoke, she rose from her bed, and looking out into the garden, she saw it in a better state than before; then, sending for the gardener, she asked him how it had all happened in so short a time. But the man answered that he could not himself understand it, and the Tsar's daughter began to think Know-nothing was in truth wonderfully wise and clever. From that moment she loved him more than herself, and sent him food from her own table.

Now the Chinese Tsar had three daughters, who were all very beautiful: the eldest was named Duasa, the second Skao, and the youngest, who had fallen in love with Ivan the peasant's son, was named Lotao. One day the Tsar called them to him and said to them: "My dear daughters, fair Princesses, the time is come that I wish to see you married; and I have called you now to bid you choose husbands from the princes of the countries around." Then the two eldest instantly named two Tsareviches with whom they were in love; but the youngest fell to weeping, and begged her father to give her for wife to Know-nothing. At this request the Tsar was amazed, and said: "Have you lost your senses, daughter, that you wish to marry the fool Know-nothing, who cannot speak even a word?" "Fool as he may be," she answered, "I entreat you, my lord father, to let me marry him." "If nothing else will please you," said the Tsar sorrowfully, "take him—you have my consent."

Soon after, the Tsar sent for the Princes whom his eldest daughters had chosen for husbands; they obeyed the invitation instantly, and came with all speed to China, and the weddings were celebrated. The Princess Lotao also was married to Ivan the peasant's son, and her elder sisters laughed at her for choosing a fool for a husband.

Not long afterwards a great army invaded the country, and its leader, the knight Polkan, demanded of the Tsar his daughter, the beautiful Lotao, for wife, threatening that, if he did not consent, he would burn his country with fire and slay his people with the sword, throw the Tsar and Tsarina into prison, and take their daughter by force. At these threats the Tsar was aghast with terror, and instantly ordered his armies to be collected; and they went forth, commanded by the two Princes, against Polkan. Then the two armies met, and fought like two terrible thunder-clouds, and Polkan overthrew the army of the Chinese Tsar.

At this time the Princess came to her husband, Ivan the peasant's son, and said to him: "My dear friend Know-nothing, they want to take me from you; the infidel knight Polkan has invaded our country with his army and routed our hosts with his terrible sword." Then Ivan told the Princess to leave him in peace; and, jumping out of the window, he ran into the open fields, and cried aloud:

"Sivka Burka! he!
Fox of Spring! Appear!
Like a grass blade, here
Stand before me!"

The horse galloped until the earth trembled: from his ears came steam, from his nostrils flames. Ivan the peasant's son crept into his ear to change himself, and came out looking such a brave knight as no pen can write down or story tell. Then he rode up to the army of Polkan, and laid about him with his sword, trod the army down under his horse's hoofs, and drove it quite out of the kingdom. At the sight of this the Chinese Tsar came to Ivan, but knew him not, and invited him to his palace; but Ivan answered: "I am not your subject and I will not serve you." And so saying, away he rode, let his horse run loose in the open fields, went back to the palace, crept again through the window, drew the bladder over his head, and lay down to sleep.

The Tsar gave a public feast for this great victory, and it lasted several days; until the knight Polkan once more invaded the country with a fresh army, and again demanded with threats the youngest Princess for his wife. The Tsar instantly assembled his armies again, and sent them against Polkan; but the knight defeated them forthwith. Then Lotao went to her husband, and everything happened exactly as before; and Ivan again drove Polkan and his army out of the empire. Thereupon the Tsar invited him to his palace; but without heeding him, Ivan turned off his horse in the fields, went back to the palace, and lay down to sleep. So the Tsar gave another feast, in honour of the victory over Polkan; but he marvelled what hero it could be who had so bravely defended his realm.

After a while, Polkan a third time invaded the empire, and all fell out as before: Ivan jumped out of the window, ran into the fields, mounted his steed, and rode forth against the enemy. Then the horse said in a human voice: "Listen, Ivan Peasantson! we have now a hard task to perform; defend yourself as stoutly as possible, and stand firm against Polkan—otherwise you and the whole Chinese army will be destroyed." Then Ivan spurred his steed, rode against Polkan's host, and began to slay them right and left. When Polkan saw that his army was defeated, he flew into a rage, and fell upon Ivan the peasant's son like a furious lion, and a fight began between the two horses, at the sight of which the whole army stood aghast. They fought for a long time, and Polkan wounded Ivan in the left hand. Thereupon Ivan the peasant's son, in a fierce rage, aimed his javelin at Polkan, and pierced him through the heart: then he struck off his head, and drove the whole army out of China.

Ivan now went to the Chinese Tsar, who bowed to the ground, and invited him to his palace. The Princess Lotao, seeing blood upon Ivan's left hand, bound it up with her handkerchief, and invited him to remain in the palace; but, without heeding her, Ivan mounted his steed and trotted off. Then he turned his horse into the fields, and went himself to sleep.