

## Ivan the Hero

Once upon a time there was a poor peasant who had two sons. One lad was healthy, but the other had been crippled at birth and couldn't even walk.

Once at harvest time everyone had gone to the fields and left the sick lad in the house all by himself. Soon, who should come to the house but an old man with a white beard. He begged the lad to bring him something to drink.

"I'd gladly get you a drink, grandpa," said the lad, "but I can't even stand."

"Go and fetch it!" urged the old man. He gave the command with such force that the lad forgot about his lack of strength. He stood up and went off and got a quart of beer. The old man drank a little of it and the rest he ordered the lad to finish.

"So you feel any strength in you now?" he asked.

"I feel so much strength entering me, grandpa," said the boy, "that if I don't lean against something I could turn the world upside down."

"Then you have too much strength now," said the old man. "Go and bring some more beer."

The lad did so and the old man ordered him to drink it all down.

"And now what do you feel?" asked the old man.

"Now, grandpa, half of my strength has disappeared."

"Then that's enough for one man," said the old man and off he went.

As for the youth, he couldn't bear just to sit around in the house. "I ought to do something for my old father," he said to himself. "After all, he worked hard for many years, and had compassion because I was crippled, and he fed me." So the youth went to have a talk with a rich nobleman.

“Would you give me your storehouse with grain if I succeeded in moving it on my shoulders from one place to another?” he asked.

The nobleman was amazed. “Who are you?” he asked. “Aren’t you crazy to want to move a storehouse with grain on your shoulders?”

“I am Ivan, son of a peasant,” answered the youth, “and will move the granary if you will give it to me.”

“Well, so be it,” laughed the man. “If you move it, it’s yours.”

So Ivan turned homeward. When his father came home from the field Ivan begged him to borrow ropes and cords from people in the village because he was going to move the granary. His father was amazed that his son walked so sturdily and talked like that, but he listened to him and went to get the ropes and cords. It took him all evening to gather them from the whole village. In the morning the youth took the whole pile, threw it on his shoulders and went to the granary. When he arrived, he began to tie the building with ropes and cords just like a spider spins his web. The overseer saw him and ran off to the nobleman.

“What shall I do with the youth?” he asked. “He says your lordship gave him permission.”

The nobleman just laughed and replied that in truth he had given permission and that he himself would go and see the youth do the job. Ivan finished tying up the granary just as the nobleman appeared. “Well,” he said mockingly, “if you succeed in moving the granary, it will all be yours!”

Ivan bent down, pushed hard and lifted the building onto his shoulders and set off. People came running up, amazed at the sight, but the youth went calmly on to his father’s garden where he put the granary. Now there would be plenty of grain for his father for years to come!

The nobleman didn't feel like laughing any more. He was sorry about the loss of the granary and grain but there was nothing he could do about it.

Ivan bowed to his father, bade him farewell and said, "I wish you a happy life. I shall go out into the world to try my strength." He went to the blacksmith and asked him to forge for him a cudgel weighing two hundred and fifty pounds and off he went with it. Ivan was walking along in the woods when he saw a rabbit scampering by. He wanted to kill it, but the rabbit spoke, "Do not kill me. It would be better if I gave you my little bunny to serve you. Maybe some day it might do you a good service."

So he took the little bunny and continued on his way. Later on he met a vixen who he wanted to kill, but she begged him for her life and gave him a little fox cub to serve him. Then he also met a wolf and from him he got a little wolf cub. Finally he received a little bear cub from a bear.

So off he went into the world with his animals. He travelled for a long time and at last arrived at a crossroad where stood a post on which were carved these words:

"If you go to the right, luck will meet you.

If you go to the left, happiness will greet you.

If you go straight ahead, death will cheat you."

So he went straight ahead. He hadn't gone far when some people came running up to him and said, "Don't travel on this road—turn back! We were foolish to do so because we couldn't read.

A terrible six-headed dragon lives here and every day he is given a human being to devour.

Today they are going to bring him a princess and sacrifice because he is bored of devouring only peasants. He demands royal flesh!"

"That's nothing," said Ivan. "I plan on going farther."

The people fled and he continued on his way. He walked a bit and saw human bones lying all over and farther on even more bones. He then came to a huge stone mountain but couldn't find caves or doors, only a crevice as though the mountain had split. Soon after, a carriage drove up. The driver unharnessed the horses and, without glancing around him, he fled. Ivan approached the carriage and saw inside a princess covered with a black shawl and she was crying bitterly. Ivan spoke to her and she was so overjoyed to find a living human being beside her that she raised her shawl. But when she saw bones lying all over, she fainted.

Soon the sun rolled down over the horizon and the mountain exploded and the crevice got bigger and bigger. Ivan tightened the huge cudgel in his hands, hid near the crevice and saw the dragon raising one of his heads. Ivan hit it with the cudgel and cut off the head. The dragon thrust out another head and he cut that off. In fact, he cut off all the heads, then he did the same with their tongues and wrapped them up in a shawl. But he was very tired so he lay down and fell into a deep sleep, as befitted a hero. And all his animals slept with him.

In the morning the driver came for the coach and he saw that the princess was still alive and sleeping. Near the mountain a youth lay asleep with six dragon heads lying beside him. So the driver killed the sleeping lad, took the dragon heads and awoke the princess. "See," he said. "The dragon killed the youth and I cut off the heads of the dragon and saved your life. Now your father will give you to me in marriage." And he drove her off to her father the king.

The animals awoke and saw that their owner lay dead. What was to be done? They ran at once to the thick dense forest to a magic spring with living and healing water. Soon they brought back the water. They sprinkled the magic water on their master and he returned to life as though awakened from sleep. But he saw neither the dragon's heads nor the princess. Only the shawl in

which the dragon's tongues were wrapped was lying there. He took the shawl and set off to the city where the princess and her father lived. When he arrived in the city, he noticed that the people were walking around making merry because there was no longer any dragon to whom they had to sacrifice human beings every day. The people told Ivan that the driver had killed the dragon and rescued the princess and now the king was giving him his daughter's hand in marriage.

Ivan went to the king's palace with his animals. Everyone was afraid and stepped off the road. Soon they entered the king's chamber where all the guests had gathered to celebrate the wedding. The king sat on the throne and nearby was the coachman. The princess sat alongside, sad and weeping. She didn't want to marry the driver, for her heart told her he was an evil person. Ivan stepped in front of the king and said, "I killed the dragon, your Majesty, and there sits an evil doer and a hypocrite!"

"Liar!" cried the driver. "Here are the heads of the dragon I killed!"

And Ivan continued. "Have they got tongues?"

They looked: the heads were minus tongues. So everyone saw who was telling the truth. They grabbed the driver and threw him into prison. The king gladly gave his daughter the princess to Ivan the Hero. And they began to live together in happiness and harmony.