

Vasilii the Unlucky – Russian Folktale

There lived in a certain town a merchant who was seven hundred times richer than anyone else, so that there was no wealth in the whole Tzardom to be compared with his. Whatever business he embarked upon prospered exceedingly and all that he handled seemed to turn to gold, so that people called him “Marko the Rich.” God had granted him no sons and but one daughter, as sweet as sweet clover, who was named Anasthasia and who was five years old.

For all his wealth, Marko the Rich was mean and flint-hearted. He gave as stingily as might be to the Church and to the poor. He could not bear to see a beggar and did one but approach his windows, he would order his servants to loose his fierce wolf-hounds and set the beasts upon him. For this reason he was feared and hated throughout all the country-side.

One evening three little old men, huddled in rags, with white hair and long white beards, came to the window to beg a crust of bread and a place to sleep. The merchant saw them and would have set the dogs upon them as usual, but Anasthasia, his little daughter, interceded for them and besought her father to let them, at least, sleep in the stable with the horses. Marko the Rich grumblingly agreed to this and she ran before them to the stalls, showed them where was clean hay to lie upon and wished them a good-night.

The little girl woke next morning before sunrise and wondering how the beggars fared, jumped out of bed, dressed herself and saying her prayer, ran to the stable and climbing to the loft, looked down upon them. To her surprise she saw that they seemed to be poor beggars no longer but were clad in splendid robes of rich brocade, like Bishops, and had crowns upon their heads and strange books in their hands.

While she looked one of the old men said to the others: “Brothers, what do ye read is befalling at this moment?”

The second answered: “Brother, in the next village to this, at the hut of the peasant called Ivan, a son is being born.”

The first said: “We will give him the name of Wassily and let him be called the Unlucky. But what inheritance shall we grant him?”

And the third replied: “Let him have for his own all the wealth of Marko the Rich in whose stable we have spent the night.” Having so spoken, they said a prayer before the holy images and left the place, while little Anasthasia, wondering at their strange words, ran back to the house, woke her father and told him what she had seen and heard.

The merchant was troubled and sent messengers after the three old men, but they could not be found; and at length, desiring to learn if by any possibility there could have been truth in their words, he ordered horses to be put to his gorgeous sledge and

drove post-haste to the next village, where he went to the priest and inquired whether a child had been born there that morning.

“A son has indeed been born to the poorest serf in the village,” answered the priest. “I myself named him Wassily, but I have not yet baptized him, since, on account of the father’s poverty, no one is willing to be godfather to the poor child.”

“I will be his godfather,” said Marko the Rich, and went out and ordered food and drink and made a plenteous feast and bade them bring the babe. So the parents brought him and he was baptized and all feasted and made merry to their heart’s content. On the next day Marko the Rich drove again to the village and stopping at the hut of the poor peasant, spoke kindly to him and flattered him. “Peasant,” he said, “thou art a miserably poor man without stick or stone of thine own or wherewith to support thy family, and thou canst not properly care for this little son of thine. Why not give him to me? I will bring him up in a decent manner and as for thee, his father, I will give thee, for thy living, a thousand roubles.”

The poor serf pondered the matter well, and at last allowed himself to be persuaded. The merchant, accordingly, gave him the one thousand roubles, took the babe, wrapped him warmly in his own coat of fox-fur, got into his sledge and drove away.

Now it was winter-time, the season of greatest cold, and the ground was covered deep with snow. After they had gone several versts from the village, Marko the Rich stopped the sledge, gave the child to his trusty driver and bade him throw him into a deep ravine whose steep brink they were passing. The man did as he was bidden, and the merchant, as he saw the helpless babe hurled into the depths, called after him mockingly: “There, thou beggarly brat! Thou art right welcome now to possess my wealth and to dispose of it as thou wilt!”

On the third day thereafter, as it happened, a company of tradesmen came driving along that same road, bringing to Marko the Rich a sum of money which they owed him. When they came opposite the ravine they thought they heard the cry of a child. They stopped their sledges while they listened attentively and one of them sent his driver to search, and the man, climbing down the steep precipice, at the bottom, among the gloomy rocks, found the babe, wrapped in the fox-furs, alive and unhurt. He carried the child to his master and the tradesman brought it to the town and to the house of Marko the Rich.

The merchant, seeing the babe, began to question them and when they had told how they had found him, knew at once that it was the little Wassily, his godchild. He took the infant in his arms and after holding it a while, handed it to his daughter, saying: “There, Anastasia, there is something for thee to nurse and to play with.” He began then to regale his guests with all manner of delicious foods and wines, and when they had feasted and drunk until they were in high humor, he said to them: “Ye are but humble tradesmen and no doubt lack not children of your own. Give the foundling to me and let him be a companion to my little daughter and I will bring him up in a fitting manner.”

The merchant who had the child would not at first agree but when the rich man said, "Do this and I forgive all thy indebtedness to me," the others added their persuasions and he consented. So the waif was again left with Marko the Rich, to the delight of Anasthasia, who at once fetched a cradle, hung it with new embroidered curtains and began to care for the little boy, never parting from him by day or night.

One day passed, and two, and three. On the third night a tempest arose and the merchant, waiting till his little daughter was asleep, took the babe from her side, put him into an open boat and pushed the boat into the sea-ocean. The storm, however, passed over and did not break, and the skiff swam safely with its burden till it neared a rocky island on which was a monastery.

It chanced that one of the monks, going in the morning to fetch a bucket of salt water, saw the floating boat, brought it to shore and took the babe to the Abbot. The Abbot named him Wassily. "And," said he, "since we find him in such an evil case, let us call him the Unlucky!" So from that day the boy was known as Wassily the Unlucky, and remained at the monastery, loved of all the monks, till he was eighteen years of age and had learned to read and write and to be clever. The Abbot in especial was fond of him and at length made him the monastery's purse-bearer and trusted him in all things.

Now once each year Marko the Rich was accustomed to journey to another Tzardom to collect money that was owed to him and on one of these trips the vessel which carried him by chance cast anchor at the monastery, where the merchant spent the night. There he was received like the rich man he was: the chapel was lighted with many candles and the Abbot summoned the monks to sing and read the holy service. Noticing among them one young man who was more sturdy and comely than all his fellows, the visitor asked his name.

"We call him Wassily the Unlucky," replied the Abbot.

"A strange name," said the merchant. "Why is he so called?"

Thereupon the Abbot told of the finding of the babe so many years before in the open boat and then Marko the Rich knew that the lad was his own godchild, whom twice he had tried to drive out of the white world. He pondered deeply in his evil mood till the service was ended, when he said to the Abbot: "How much should I like to possess such a clever, handsome lad as yours! If I but had him, I would appoint him at once my chief clerk, entrust all my affairs to his management and make him a rich man. Couldst thou not put him in my care?"

The Abbot thought over this a long time, excusing himself on one pretext or another when the merchant pressed him to answer. Finally, however, Marko the Rich offered him a sum of twenty-five thousand roubles with which to rebuild the monastery. "Surely," urged he, "this is but God's manner of repaying to you the charity ye have given to a foundling. As for him, he will find a good home with me, I promise."

The Abbot consulted the monks and at length it was agreed to let Wassily the Unlucky go. He called the lad accordingly, told him his decision and gave him into

the charge of the merchant, who bade him go to the town in which he lived and carry an important letter to his wife, while he himself continued his journey. And the sealed letter which Marko the Rich sent by his hand read thus: "Marko the Merchant to his wife: As soon as my messenger brings thee this letter, prepare at once in the kitchen a great caldron of boiling lye. Call him then to thee and when he doth pass the caldron, push him into it, so that he may die. Do this without fail, for this youth works evil against me. If thou dost not, beware my punishment!"

Wassily the Unlucky took the letter, said farewell with tears to the Abbot and the monks, and quitting the island, set out on his way to the home of his new master. Whether the time was long or short, whether the road was rough or smooth, he came at length one night to a wood in which was no human habitation and no building save a poor shed for cows. He entered this to sleep and found within it three little old beggar-men with white hair and long white beards.

He shared his bread with them and when they had conversed for some time all fell asleep, and as he slept Wassily dreamed a dream. The three little old men seemed to be beggar-men no longer, but were clad in robes of splendid brocade, with crowns on their heads and curious leathern books in their hands. As he wondered at this, he thought one of the old men said to the others: "Brothers, whither goeth this youth?"

The second answered: "Brother, to the house of Marko the Rich, to carry a letter from the merchant to his wife."

"What saith the letter?" asked the first.

The second replied: "It bids his wife prepare a huge kettle of boiling lye and push the youth into it, so that he may die. How shall we bring this evil to naught?"

"Brothers, I will alter the message," said the third, and taking the letter, he blew upon it, saying: "Let him now carry it without fear, for God will not abandon him."

In his dream Wassily the Unlucky had heard this conversation with tears, saying to himself: "What have I done, then, that the merchant should desire my cruel death?" And when he woke he was glad to think it had been but a dream. The three little old men had already departed, and feeling the letter safe in his pocket, he went on his way to the town of Marko the Rich.

So he came to the merchant's house and gave the letter to his wife. And when she had broken the seal and opened it, she read thus:

"Marko the Merchant to his wife: As soon as my messenger brings thee this letter, prepare at once a festival. Call the priest and the neighbors to thee and when they are come, marry him straightway to our daughter Anasthasia. Do this without fail, for this youth shall be my heir. If thou dost not, beware my punishment!"

The wife at once called her daughter, read her the letter and brought her to the youth, and each loved each other from that moment. She bade the cooks bake and roast and the serving-men fetch beer and wine for the festival, swept and garnished the house, dressed the lovely Anasthasia in her richest apparel, adorned her with jewels and sent

for the priest and the neighbors. That same night Wassily the Unlucky and the merchant's daughter were brought under the golden crown, and they remained at the house of Marko the Rich and for some months lived happily together.

One day news was brought that the merchant was returning by ship, and his wife, with her daughter and son-in-law, hastened to the dock to meet him. When Marko the Rich saw them, however, and learned that Wassily the Unlucky was now the husband of his daughter, he flew into a violent passion and calling his wife aside, demanded how she had dared disobey his express command.

She replied that she had but carried out his written instruction and when he had examined the letter he had sent her, he was compelled to admit that it was in his own handwriting. He swallowed his rage, therefore, for the time, and began to plan how he might destroy his son-in-law without fail.

They lived together one month, they lived together two, and three, when one day Marko the Rich called Wassily the Unlucky to him and bade him prepare to journey at once across three times nine countries to the thirtieth realm. "In this realm," he said, "is the Tzardom of Tzar Zmey. Go to him and bid him pay thee, for me, the sum he owes for rent during the past twelve years, since he has built his Palace on land which is mine. When this is accomplished, inquire concerning twelve of my ships which were lost upon his coasts some three years since and from which no tidings have come. See to it that thou start by sunrise to-morrow."

Anasthasia, when she heard, wept bitterly and tried to dissuade her father, but in vain. So next morning Wassily the Unlucky said a prayer to God, bade his wife farewell and with a store of biscuits in his knapsack, mounted his good horse and set out on his journey.

Whether the way was long or short, whether the Tzardom of Tzar Zmey was far or near, he came at length to its border. Here was a wide river on which an old ferryman plied back and forth. He rode aboard and crossed to the other side, when the ferryman asked: "Whither art thou faring, my friend?"

"I go to Tzar Zmey," he replied, "to ask of him money he owes my little father-in-law for rental of land on which he has built his Palace."

"Well," said the ferryman, "it will take a smart lad to get it. Wilt thou serve me a service with Tzar Zmey?"

"Gladly," answered Wassily.

"Then," said the ferryman, "when thou comest before him, if thou hast opportunity, remind him that now for thirty years he has condemned me to ferry people back and forth across this river. Ask of him, I pray thee, whether I shall have to labor thus for thirty years more, or if not, when I shall be free to go whither I will. Wilt thou do this for me?"

Wassily the Unlucky promised and resumed his journey, and before long he came to an arm of the sea-ocean, across which lay stranded a huge whale-fish. A thick forest

was growing on its tail and on its back was a village whose peasants plowed up and down its sides with their iron plows and drove sharpened stakes into its flesh. Boys had made a playground between its eyes and on its mustache girls picked mushrooms. Wassily rode across on the whale-fish, his horse's hoofs pounding on its ribs, and when he reached the other side the monster opened its wide mouth, sighing bitterly.

"A good journey to thee, my friend," it said. "Whither goest thou?"

"To Tzar Zmey," answered Wassily, "to get money he owes my little father-in-law."

"Well," said the whale-fish, "thou art a clever lad if thou dost not fail! Wilt thou serve me a service with Tzar Zmey?"

"Cheerfully," Wassily replied.

"When thou seest him, then," said the whale-fish, "if thou hast opportunity, say to him that I have been lying here in this torture for three years, where wayfarers, on horse and afoot, wear my body to my ribs. Beg him to show me mercy and ask whether my disgrace and punishment is to last three years more, or if not, when I shall be free to swim where I will. Wilt thou say this?"

Wassily the Unlucky gave the whale-fish his promise and rode on till he came to a green meadow on which stood a great Palace of white stone. No sentries were on guard at the gate nor any watchman at the door, and he left his horse to graze on the meadow and entered.

Within the Palace all was still and he saw no one. He went through one room after another, finding each more beautiful than the last, till he came to the inmost chamber of all, and here, sitting on a chair, he found a beautiful damsel weeping.

"Health to thee, lovely maiden!" he said.

"And to thee," she answered. "But what manner of man art thou? How didst thou come into this dreadful place? Knowest thou not that this is the abode of Tzar Zmey, the Serpent-Tzar, who devours a man at every meal?"

Wassily the Unlucky told her his errand, whereat the girl exclaimed: "Well that thou hast seen me first! Thou hast been sent here not to fetch money from him, but in order that he may devour thee. Never mind, I shall save thy life. But tell me, by what road didst thou travel and what didst thou see on thy way?"

So he related to her how he had met the ferry-man and the whale-fish and what each had asked, and while they were yet conversing, the ground on which the Palace stood began to shiver and its walls to rumble and shake. "The Serpent-Tzar is coming!" she cried. "Thou must hide at once!" She showed him a coffer beneath the bed, made him lie down in it and shut its lid. "Listen," she said, "and thou shalt hear whatever the Snake says to me."

Presently Tzar Zmey, in the form of a huge serpent, came rolling into the room. “I smell a Russian smell!” he said. “Who has been here?”

The damsel laughed, and said she: “Would a Russian by any chance dare to venture into the innermost room of thy Palace? Thou hast been flying about all day in Russia and thou thyself hast brought the odor with thee!”

The Serpent-Tzar was satisfied and began to kiss and fondle her without stint, and then, coiling his scaly length on the bed, he said: “I am tired. Come, my darling, and rub my head so that I may go to sleep.” So she began to rub his head, and as she did so, she said: “My Tzar, while thou wert absent I had such a curious dream! Wouldst thou hear it?”

“Yes,” he said.

“I dreamed,” she told him, “that I was walking along a highroad and where it crossed an arm of the sea-ocean there lay stranded a huge whale-fish so that people on horses and afoot crossed upon his body. And the monster spoke to me and asked me how much longer it must needs endure that torture and how soon it should be free?”

Then Tzar Zmey drowsily answered her. “It shall lie there until it vomits forth again, whole and sound, twelve ships which it swallowed without my permission three years since in the middle of the sea-ocean.”

The girl said: “Then in my dream I went on till I came to a broad river, where a ferryman plied back and forth. And when he had ferried me over he asked me how much longer he would be made so to labor, and when he should be free.”

Tzar Zmey, half asleep, answered: “Let him only take into his boat the first who comes, and, leaping out himself, push the boat out into the stream. Then will the newcomer be compelled to ferry in his place forever.”

Having thus spoken, the Serpent-Tzar fell fast asleep and snored till the walls trembled, when the girl opened the coffer and Wassily the Unlucky thanked her and left the Palace. He caught his horse on the meadow, mounted and hastened back the way he had come. When he came to the arm of the sea-ocean and began to cross on the whale-fish, the monster saw him and opening its wide jaws, called out: “Well, friend, didst thou serve me the service with Tzar Zmey?”

“Yes,” said Wassily.

“And what said he?” asked the whale-fish.

“Wait till I am over,” said Wassily, “and I will tell thee.” So he crossed, and as soon as he came to the other side he mounted on its tail and cried with a loud voice: “O ye villagers and wayfarers, ye who would not be suddenly overwhelmed, leave this place without delay, for the sea-ocean is about to cover it!” Hearing, the wayfarers hastened and the peasants left their plowing and the children their playing and mushroom-gathering, and ran to their houses and loaded their carts with all their

belongings and carried them to a distance, till the whale-fish was as deserted as if the Tartars were coming.

Then Wassily the Unlucky shouted: "O whale-fish! this punishment has been thine because three years since thou didst swallow, without Tzar Zmey's permission, twelve ships in the blue sea-ocean, and thou shalt be set free only when thou dost vomit them forth unharmed." So saying, he spurred his horse and leaped from the tail of the whale-fish to the shore.

He had need to hasten, for when it heard, the monster began to move as if a hill were turning over. It thrashed the water into foam and vomited forth, one after the other, the twelve ships. The sailors rejoiced to see the white world again: they shouted and blew on trumpets, put up their sails and showed a flag at each masthead. On each ship a priest was chanting the Te Deum, and altogether there was such a roar of gladness that it waked the whole sea-ocean.

As soon as the ships appeared the whale-fish found itself free and with a mighty splash it plunged into deep water. Then from the waves it opened its huge mouth and cried to Wassily: "What service shall I serve thee, my friend, and how shall I repay thee? Wilt thou have great pearls, or the bright-colored stones that ships carry?"

"If thou wilt," answered Wassily, "I will have as thy gift some of the bright-colored stones."

The whale dropped to the bottom of the sea-ocean like a key, and came back with an enameled chest in its mouth, and in the chest were jewels whose value and brightness cannot be told in words, finer than are to be found in the treasuries of all the Tzars together.

Wassily the Unlucky called to him the captains of the ships, and asked: "Whose ships are ye and whither go ye?"

They answered: "These are ships of Marko the Rich, to whom, when we were swallowed by the whale-fish, we were sailing with our cargoes."

"I am his son-in-law," he said. "Carry ye to him these jewels also."

They would have taken him aboard with them but he bade them await him at the mouth of the wide river that was the border of Tzar Zmey's Tzardom, and rode on to where the old ferryman plied in his boat.

"Well, friend," asked the ferryman, "didst thou serve me the service with Tzar Zmey?"

"Yes," replied Wassily.

"And what said he?" asked the ferryman.

"When I am over," he replied, "I will tell thee." So he crossed and as the boat came to the other side, he rode to its prow and said: "O ferryman, when the next one comes to

cross, take him into thy boat and immediately push it out into the stream; then will he be compelled to ferry here in thy place forever.”

So saying, he leaped his horse to the shore and rode to the river’s mouth, where the ships awaited him, and went on board and sailed to the town of Marko the Rich.

Now when they landed at the dock and messengers ran and told the merchant that Wassily the Unlucky had returned with the twelve lost ships, bringing with him such a great treasure of jewels that it could not be reckoned, he wellnigh lost his senses with rage. He pretended to welcome his son-in-law with joy, however, and said to himself: “I will send him again to Tzar Zmey and next time he shall not escape, for I will go myself and arrange all things beforehand.”

So, as soon as the rejoicings were ended, he gave out that he must go himself upon a journey and called for horses and relays and departed. He rode a long way and he rode a short way, and coming at length to the broad river, ordered the old ferryman to carry him across.

But as soon as he had entered the boat, the ferryman pushed it out into the stream, shouting: “Now, whoever thou art, thou shalt take thy turn!” and went away rejoicing. And Marko the Rich found himself thus in the power of the Serpent-Tzar, and not knowing the secret, was compelled to ferry people over forever.

So Wassily the Unlucky came to no harm and lived in peace, plenty and charity with the beautiful Anasthasia who could not love him enough, and in time inherited all the lands and treasures of Marko the Rich.