

## Reading 10: The Three Wonderful Beggars

*by Andrew Lang*

There once lived a merchant whose name was Mark, whom people called 'Mark the Rich.' He was a very hard-hearted man, for he could not bear poor people, and if he caught sight of a beggar anywhere near his house, he would order the servants to drive him away, or would set the dogs at him.

One day three very poor old men came begging to the door, and just as he was going to let the fierce dogs loose on them, his little daughter, Anastasia, crept close up to him and said, 'Dear daddy, let the poor old men sleep here to-night, do—to please me.'

Her father could not bear to refuse her, and the three beggars were allowed to sleep in a loft. At night, when everyone in the house was fast asleep, little Anastasia got up, climbed up to the loft, and peeped in.

The three old men stood in the middle of the loft, leaning on their sticks, with their long grey beards flowing down over their hands, and were talking together in low voices.

'What news is there?' asked the eldest.

'In the next village the peasant Ivan has just had his seventh son. What shall we name him, and what fortune shall we give him?' said the second.

The third whispered, 'Call him Vassili, and give him all the property of the hard-hearted man in whose loft we stand, and who wanted to drive us from his door.'

After a little more talk the three made themselves ready and crept softly away.

Anastasia, who had heard every word, ran straight to her father, and told him all.

Mark was very much surprised. He thought and thought, and in the morning he drove to the next village to try and find out if such a child really had been born. He went first to the priest, and asked him about the children in his parish.

'Yesterday,' said the priest, 'a boy was born in the poorest house in the village. I named the unlucky little thing "Vassili." He is the seventh son, and the eldest is only seven years old, and they hardly have a mouthful amongst them all. Who can they get to stand godfather to such a little beggar boy?'

The merchant's heart beat fast, and his mind was full of bad thoughts about that poor little baby. He would be godfather himself, he said, and he ordered a fine christening feast. So the child was brought and christened, and Mark was very friendly to its father. After the ceremony was over he took Ivan aside and said,

'Look here, my friend, you are a poor man. How can you afford to bring up the boy? Give him to me and I'll make something of him, and I'll give you a present of a thousand crowns. Is that a bargain?'

Ivan scratched his head, and thought and thought, and then he agreed. Mark counted out the money, wrapped the baby up in a fox skin, laid it in the sledge beside him, and drove back towards home. When he had driven some miles he drew up, carried the child to the edge of a steep precipice and threw it over, muttering, 'There, now try to take my property!'

Very soon after this some foreign merchants travelled along that same road on the way to see Mark and to pay the twelve thousand crowns which they owed him.

As they were passing near the precipice they heard a sound of crying, and on looking over they saw a little green meadow wedged in between two great heaps of snow, and on the meadow a baby lay amongst the flowers.

The merchants picked up the child, wrapped it up carefully, and drove on. When they saw Mark they told him what a strange thing they had found. Mark guessed at once that the child must be his godson, asked to see him, and said,

'That's a nice little fellow. I should like to keep him. If you will make him over to me, I will let you off your debt.' The merchants were very pleased to make so good a bargain, left the child with Mark, and drove off.

At night Mark took the child, put it in a barrel, fastened the lid tight down, and threw it into the sea. The barrel floated away to a great distance, and at last it floated close up to a monastery. The monks were just spreading out their nets to dry on the shore, when they heard the sound of crying. It seemed to come from the barrel which was bobbing about near the water's edge. They drew it to land and opened it, and there was a little child! When the abbot heard the news, he decided to bring up the boy, and named him 'Vassili.' The boy lived on with the monks, and grew up to be a clever, gentle, and handsome young man. No one could read, write, or sing better than he, and he did everything so well that the abbot made him wardrobe keeper.

Now, it happened about this time that the merchant, Mark, came to the monastery in the course of a journey. The monks were very polite to him and showed him their house and church and all they had. When he went into the church the choir was singing, and one voice

was so clear and beautiful, that he asked who it belonged to. Then the abbot told him of the wonderful way in which Vassili had come to them, and Mark saw clearly that this must be his godson whom he had twice tried to kill.

He said to the abbot, 'I can't tell you how much I enjoy that young man's singing. If he could only come to me I would make him overseer of all my business. As you say, he is so good and clever. Do spare him to me. I will make his fortune, and will present your monastery with twenty thousand crowns.'

The abbot hesitated a good deal, but he consulted all the other monks, and at last they decided that they ought not to stand in the way of Vassili's good fortune. Then Mark wrote a letter to his wife and gave it to Vassili to take to her, and this was what was in the letter, 'When the bearer of this arrives, take him into the soap factory, and when you pass near the great boiler, push him in. If you don't obey my orders I shall be very angry, for this young man is a bad fellow who is sure to ruin us all if he lives.'

Vassili had a good voyage, and on landing set off on foot for Mark's home. On the way he met three beggars, who asked him: 'Where are you going, Vassili?'

'I am going to the house of Mark the Merchant, and have a letter for his wife,' replied Vassili.

'Show us the letter,' said the beggars. Vassili handed them the letter. They blew on it and gave it back to him, saying: 'Now go and give the letter to Mark's wife. You will not be forsaken.' Vassili reached the house and gave the letter. When the mistress read it she could hardly believe her eyes and called for her daughter. In the letter was written, quite plainly, 'When you receive this letter, get ready for a wedding, and let the bearer be married next day to my daughter, Anastasia. If you don't obey my orders I shall be very angry.'

Anastasia saw the bearer of the letter, and he pleased her very much. They dressed Vassili in fine clothes and next day he was married to Anastasia.

In due time, Mark returned from his travels. His wife, daughter, and son-in-law all went out to meet him. When Mark saw Vassili he flew into a terrible rage with his wife. 'How dared you marry my daughter without my consent?' he asked.

'I only carried out your orders,' said she. 'Here is your letter.' Mark read it. It certainly was his handwriting, but by no means his wishes.

'Well,' thought he, 'you've escaped me three times, but I think I shall get the better of you now.' And he waited a month and was very kind and pleasant to his daughter and her husband. At the end of that time he said to Vassili one day, 'I want you to go for me to my friend the Serpent King, in his beautiful country at the world's end. Twelve years ago he

built a castle on some land of mine. I want you to ask for the rent for those twelve years and also to find out from him what has become of my twelve ships which sailed for his country three years ago.'

Vassili dared not disobey. He said good-bye to his young wife, who cried bitterly at parting, hung a bag of biscuits over his shoulders, and set out.

I really cannot tell you whether the journey was long or short. As he tramped along he suddenly heard a voice saying: 'Vassili! Where are you going?'

Vassili looked about him, and, seeing no one, called out: 'Who spoke to me?'

'I did. I am this old wide-spreading oak. Tell me where you are going.'

'I am going to the Serpent King to receive twelve years' rent from him.'

'When the time comes, remember me and ask the king, "Rotten to the roots, half dead but still green, stands the old oak. Is it to stand much longer on the earth?"'

Vassili went on further. He came to a river and got into the ferryboat. The old ferryman asked, 'Are you going far, my friend?'

'I am going to the Serpent King.'

'Then think of me and say to the king, "For thirty years the ferryman has rowed to and fro. Will the tired old man have to row much longer?"'

'Very well,' said Vassili, 'I'll ask him.' And he walked on.

In time he came to a narrow strait of the sea and a great whale lay over across it whose back people walked and drove as if it had been a bridge or a road. As he stepped on it the whale said, 'Do tell me where you are going.'

'I am going to the Serpent King.'

And the whale begged, 'Think of me and say to the king, "The poor whale has been lying three years across the strait, and men and horses have nearly trampled his back into his ribs. Is he to lie there much longer?"'

'I will remember,' said Vassili, and he went on. He walked, and walked, and walked, till he came to a great green meadow. In the meadow a large and splendid castle stood. Its white marble walls sparkled in the light, the roof was covered with mother o' pearl, which shone like a rainbow, and the sun glowed like fire on the crystal windows. Vassili walked in, and went from one room to another astonished at all the splendor he saw.

When he reached the last room of all, he found a beautiful girl sitting on a bed. As soon as she saw him she said, 'Oh, Vassili, what brings you to this accursed place?' Vassili told her why he had come and all he had seen and heard on the way.

The girl said, 'You have not been sent here to collect rents, but for your own destruction, and that the serpent may devour you.' She had not time to say more, when the whole castle shook, and a rustling, hissing, groaning sound was heard. The girl quickly pushed Vassili into a chest under the bed, locked it and whispered, 'Listen to what the serpent and I talk about.' Then she rose up to receive the Serpent King.

The monster rushed into the room, and threw itself panting on the bed, crying, 'I've flown half over the world. I'm tired, VERY tired, and want to sleep — scratch my head.'

The beautiful girl sat down near him, stroking his hideous head, and said in a sweet coaxing voice, 'You know everything in the world. After you left, I had such a wonderful dream. Will you tell me what it means?'

'Out with it then, quick!' demanded the Serpent King. 'What was it?'

'I dreamt I was walking on a wide road, and an oak tree said to me, "Ask the king this, Rotten at the roots, half dead, and yet green stands the old oak. Is it to stand much longer on the earth?"'

'It must stand till someone comes and pushes it down with his foot. Then it will fall, and under its roots will be found more gold and silver than even Mark the Rich has got.'

'Then I dreamt I came to a river, and the old ferryman said to me, "For thirty years, the ferryman has rowed to and fro. Will the tired old man have to row much longer?"'

'That depends on himself. If someone gets into the boat to be ferried across, the old man has only to push the boat off and go his way without looking back. The man in the boat will then have to take his place.'

'And at last I dreamt that I was walking over a bridge made of a whale's back, and the living bridge spoke to me and said, "Here have I been stretched out these three years, and men and horses have trampled my back down into my ribs. Must I lie here much longer?"'

'He will have to lie there till he has thrown up the twelve ships of Mark the Rich which he swallowed. Then he may plunge back into the sea and heal his back.'

And the Serpent King closed his eyes, turned round on his other side, and began to snore so loud that the windows rattled.

In all haste the lovely girl helped Vassili out of the chest and showed him part of his way back. He thanked her very politely, and hurried off.

When he reached the strait the whale asked, 'Have you thought of me?'

'Yes, as soon as I am on the other side, I will tell you what you want to know.'

When he was on the other side Vassili said to the whale, 'Throw up those twelve ships of Mark's which you swallowed three years ago.' The great fish heaved itself up and threw up all the twelve ships and their crews. Then he shook himself for joy, and plunged into the sea.

Vassili went on further till he reached the ferry, where the old man asked, 'Did you think of me?'

'Yes, and as soon as you have ferried me across I will tell you what you want to know.'

When they had crossed over, Vassili said, 'Let the next man who comes stay in the boat, but do you step on shore, push the boat off, and you will be free, and the other man must take your place.'

Then Vassili went on further still, and soon came to the old oak tree, pushed it with his foot and it fell over. There, at the roots, was more gold and silver than even Mark the Rich had.

And now the twelve ships which the whale had thrown up came sailing along and anchored close by. On the deck of the first ship stood the three beggars whom Vassili had met formerly, and they said, 'Heaven has blessed you, Vassili.' Then they vanished away and he never saw them again.

The sailors carried all the gold and silver into the ship, and then they set sail for home with Vassili on board.

Mark was more furious than ever. He had his horses harnessed and drove off himself to see the Serpent King and to complain of the way in which he had been betrayed. When he reached the river he sprang into the ferryboat. The ferryman, however, did not get in but pushed the boat off. . . .

Vassili led a good and happy life with his dear wife, and his kind mother-in-law lived with them. He helped the poor and fed and clothed the hungry and naked and all Mark's riches became his. For many years Mark has been ferrying people across the river. His face is wrinkled, his hair and beard are snow white, and his eyes are dim; but still he rows on.