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IMAGINATION OVER KNOWLEDGE

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## The Story of the Three Beggars

Once upon a time there was a merchant named Mark who had the unpleasant quality of not being able to stand poor people. One day, three old, poor beggars came to Mark's door. When Mark tried to call his vicious dogs, his daughter Anastasia crawled up to him and said, "Dear father, let these poor men sleep with us tonight. Please, do it to please me." Mark loved his young daughter and could not refuse her, so the three men were allowed to sleep in the attic.

That night, when everyone was asleep, Anastasia crept up to the attic. There she saw the three men standing in the middle of the room, each leaning on their sticks. "What news is there?" whispered the oldest. "In the village next door, farmer Ivan has just had his seventh son. What should we name him? What fortune should we give him?" whispered the second. The third whispered, "Name him Vassili and give him all the possessions of the heartless man whose attic we are standing in, the one who wanted to send his dogs after us." Then the three men packed their belongings and quietly left.

Anastasia, who had heard every word, ran to her father and told him everything. Mark wanted to know more, so he rode the next day to the priest of the nearby village. "Yesterday, a boy was born," said the priest, "in the poorest house in the village. I named him Vassili. He

is the seventh son, and they barely have enough money to feed everyone."

The merchant's heart was racing. "I will be his godfather," he thought to himself and arranged a baptism party. The child was



baptized, and Mark was very friendly to Ivan, the father of the child. After the party, he spoke to Ivan and said, "Look, my friend. You are a poor man. How can you afford to raise the boy? Give him to me, and I will give you a thousand coins."

Ivan eventually agreed. Mark paid the man and rode home. After a few miles, he stopped. He carried the child to a steep cliff and let the child fall, saying, "So, try to take my possessions now." Soon after, some merchants traveled along the same road to meet Mark and pay him the twelve thousand coins they owed him. When they came to the cliff, they heard a baby crying. When they went to look, they saw a baby lying there. The merchants picked up the child and took him with them.

The merchants told Mark about their remarkable find. Mark, who immediately suspected it was his godchild, said, "What a nice little guy. If you give him to me, I

will forgive your debt of twelve thousand coins." The merchants were very happy with that.

At night, Mark locked the child in a barrel and threw it into the sea. The barrel floated away and ended up near a monastery. Monks who were fishing at the time heard the sound of crying coming from the drifting barrel. To their amazement, they found a small child inside. When the abbot of the monastery heard the news, he decided to raise the boy and gave him the name Vassili.

The boy grew up among the monks, becoming a smart, friendly, and handsome young man. No one could read, write, or sing better than he.

It happened around this time that the merchant Mark came to the monastery during a trip. As he entered the church, the choir was singing. One voice was so clear and beautiful that Mark asked who it belonged to. The abbot told him about the miraculous way the boy had come to the monastery, and it was clear to Mark that this must be his godchild. He said to the abbot, "I have never heard anyone sing so beautifully, and if he is as clever as you say, he will be able to help me excellently in my business. If you let him come with me, I will donate twenty thousand coins to your monastery."

The abbot consulted the other monks, and eventually they agreed. Mark wrote a letter to his wife and gave it to Vassili. In the letter, it said: "When the deliverer of this letter arrives, take him to the soap factory. When you pass by the big kettle, push him in. If you don't do as I ask, I will be very angry, because this young man will ruin us if he continues to live."

On the way, Vassili met three beggars who asked him, "Where are you going, Vassili?" "I am going to the house of the merchant Mark. I have a letter for his wife," Vassili replied. "Let us see the letter." Vassili showed them the letter. The three men blew on it and gave the letter back with the words, "Now go and give the letter to Mark's wife. We won't leave you alone." Vassili reached the house and gave the letter to the woman. When she read it, she could hardly believe what was written in it. The letter said, "When you receive this letter, arrange a wedding immediately and let the deliverer marry my daughter, Anastasia, the next day. If you do not obey my commands, I will be very angry." She called her daughter, and when Anastasia saw the deliverer, she didn't mind marrying him at all. The next day they were married.

On the day Mark returned from his travels, his wife, daughter, and son-in-law all came to meet him. When Mark saw Vassili, he became angry. "How dare you let my daughter marry without my permission?" he yelled at his wife. "I only obeyed your commands," she said and gave him his letter. He read it, and it was definitely his handwriting, but not his wish.

A month passed, and Mark was very kind to his daughter and her husband. At the end of the month, he asked Vassili, "I would like you to visit the Snake King for me. He lives in a land at the end of the world.

Twelve years ago, he built a castle on my land. I want you to ask for the rent for those twelve years. I also want you to ask him what happened to my twelve ships that sailed to his land three years ago."

So Vassili said goodbye and began his journey. On the way, he heard a voice from an old oak tree say, "Vassili, where are you going?" Vassili told the oak tree what he was going to do. The oak tree said, "When you get there, ask the king this too: The old oak is rotten to the roots, half-dead but still green. Must it remain standing on earth much longer?"

Then Vassili arrived at a river and got on a ferry. The old ferryman asked, "Are you traveling far, my friend?" "I am going to the Snake King." "Then think of me and tell the king: 'The ferryman has been rowing back and forth for thirty years. Must the tired old man row any longer?'"

And he continued on his journey. After a while, he arrived at a narrow sea strait, and over the sea lay a great whale upon whose back people walked. When he stepped on, the whale said, "Tell me where you are going." "I am going to the Snake King." And the whale said, "Think of me and tell the king: 'The poor whale has been lying across the sea strait for three years, and men and horses have almost trampled his back to pieces. Must he continue to lie there any longer?'"

Vassili continued until he reached a beautiful castle. He walked inside and found a beautiful girl on a bed. As soon as she saw him, she said, "Oh, Vassili, what brings you to this cursed place?"

Vassili told her why he had come and everything he had experienced on the way. The girl said, "You have not come here to do business for the merchant, but for your own destruction. The snake will devour you." She could not say more because the castle began to shake

and groan. The girl hid Vassili in a chest under the bed and whispered, "Listen to what the snake and I are talking about." Then she got up to receive the Snake King.

The Snake King stormed into the room in a rage. The beautiful girl sat next to him and stroked his hideous head, saying with a sweet voice, "You know everything in the world. After you left, I had a dream. Can you tell me what it means?"

"What kind of dream? Just tell me," hissed the Snake King.

"I dreamed that an oak tree said to me: 'Ask the king this: my roots are rotten, half-dead, and yet green. How long must I remain standing on the earth?'"

"It must remain standing until someone comes and knocks it down. Then it will fall. More gold and silver will be found under its roots than even the merchant Mark possesses," said the Snake King.

"Then I dreamed that I came to a river, and the old ferryman said to me: 'I have been rowing back and forth for thirty years. Must the old, tired man row any longer?'"

"That depends on the man himself. If someone gets in the boat to be ferried across, the ferryman just has to push the boat off and walk away. The man in the boat will then have to take his place."

"Lastly, I dreamed that I was walking over a bridge made of the back of a whale. And the fish asked me: 'I have been lying here stretched out for three years, and my back hurts from all the people who have walked on me. Must I continue to lie here any longer?'"

"He must lie there until he has spit out the twelve ships of the merchant Mark that he swallowed three years ago. Then he can dive back into the sea and his back will heal."

The Snake King closed his eyes and began to snore loudly. The girl freed Vassili from the chest and showed him part of the way back. When he reached the whale, it asked, "Did you think of me?" Vassili said, "When I get to the other side, I will tell you." When he arrived there, Vassili said to the whale, "Spit out the twelve ships of the merchant Mark that you swallowed three years ago." The whale lifted itself up and spit out all twelve ships and their crews. Then it felt great and jumped into the sea to go on its way.

Vassili continued until he reached the ferry. The old ferryman asked him, "And have you thought of me?" And Vassili said, "Yes, as soon as I have reached the other side, I will tell you what you want to know." When they had crossed, Vassili said, "Let the next man who comes stay in the boat, but step ashore... push your boat off and you will be free. Another man will take your place."

"Then Vassili reached the old oak. He pushed it and it fell. There at the roots, Vassili saw more gold and silver than even the merchant Mark had. And at that moment, the twelve ships that the whale had spit out sailed with him. On the deck of the first ship stood the three beggars, and they said, "Heaven has blessed you, Vassili." Then they disappeared, and he never saw them again.



The sailors carried all the gold and silver onto the ship and took Vassili aboard. Mark was furious and rode his horse to visit the Snake King himself. When he reached the river, he jumped into the ferry. However, the ferryman did not get in but pushed the boat away... Vassili had a happy marriage with his wife, and his friendly mother-in-law lived with them. He took good care of the poor and gave them food and clothing. And Mark has been ferrying people across the river for years. His face is wrinkled, and his hair and beard are snow white. But he keeps rowing, and rowing, and rowing...