**Wassillissa the Beautiful.**

In a certain Tzardom, across three times nine kingdoms, beyond high mountain-chains, there vnee lived a merchant. He had been married for twelve years, but in that time there had been born him only one child, a daughter, who from her cradle was called Wassilissa the Beautiful. When the little girl was eight years old the mother fell ill, and hefore many days it was plain to be seen that she rmust die. So she called her little daughter to her, and taking a tiny wooden doll from under the ilanket of the bed, put it into her hands and said:

"My little Wassilissa, my dear daughter, listen to what I say, remember well my last words and fail not to carry out my wishes. I am dying, and with my blessing, I leave to thee this little doll. It is very precious for there is no other like it in the whole world. Carry it always about with thee in thy pocket and never show it to anyone. When evil threatens thee or sorrow befalls thee, go into a corner, take it from thy pocket and give it something to eat and drink. It will eat and drink a little, and then thou mayest tell it thy trouble and ask its advice, and it will tell thee how to act in thy time of need." So saying, she kissed her little daughter on the forehead, blessed her, and shortly after died.

Little Wassilissa grieved greatly for her mother, and her sorrow was so deep that when the dark night came, she lay in her bed and wept and did not sleep. At length she bethought herself of the tiny doll, so she rose and took it from the pocket of her gown and finding a piece of wheat-bread and a cup of kwas, she set them before it, and said: "There, my little doll, take it. Eat a little, and drink a little, and listen to my grief. My dear mother is dead and I am lonely for her."

Then the doll's eyes began to shine like fire-flies, and suddenly it became alive. It ate a morsel of the bread and took a sip of the kwas, and when it had eaten and drank, it said: "Don't weep, little Wassilissa. Grief is worst at night. Lie down, shut shine eyes, comfort thyself and go to sleep. The morning is wiser than the evening." So Wassilissa the Beautiful lay down, comforted herself and went to sleep, and the next day her grieving was not so deep and her tears were less bitter.

Now after the death of his wife, the merchant sorrowed for many days as was right, but at the end of that time he began to desire to marry again and to look about him for a suitable wife. This was not difficult to find, for he had a fine house, with a stable of swift horses, besides being a good man who gave much to the poor. Of all the women he saw, however, the one who, to his mind, suited him best of all, was a widow of about his own age with two daughters of her own, and she, he thought, besides being a good housekeeper, would be a kind foster-mother to his little Wassilissa.

So the merchant married the widow and brought her home as his wife, but the little girl soon found that her foster-mother was very far from being what her father had thought. She was a cold, cruel woman, who had desired the merchant for the sake of his wealth, and had no love for his daughter. Wassilissa was the greatest beauty in the whole village, while her own daughters were as spare and homely as two crows, and because of this all three enned and hated her.

They gave her all sorts of errands to run and difficult tasks to perform, in order that the toil might make her thin and worn and that her face might grow brown from sun and wind, and they treated her so cruelly as to leave few joys in life for her. But all this the little Wassilissa endured without complaint, and while the stepmother's two daughters grew always thinner and uglier, in spite of the fact that they had no hard tasks to do, never went out in cold or rain, and sat always with their arms folded like ladies of a Court, she herself had cheeks like blood and milk and grew every day more and more beautiful.

Now the reason for this was the tiny doll, without whose help little Wassilissa could never have managed to do all the work that was laid upon her. Each night, when everyone else was sound asleep, she would get up from her bed, take the doll into a closet, and locking the door, give it something to eat and drink, and say: "There, my little doll, take it. Eat a little, drink a little, and listen to my grief I live in my father's house, but my spiteful stepmother wishes to drive me out of the white world. Tell me ~ How shall I act, and what shall I do?"

Then the little doll's eyes would begin to shine like glow-worms, and it would become alive. It would eat a little food, and sip a little drink, and then it would comfort her and tell her how to act. While Wassilissa slept, it would get ready all her work for the next day, so that she had only to rest in the shade and gather flowers, for the doll would have the kitchen garden weeded, and the beds of cabbage watered, and plenty of fresh water brought from the well, and the stoves heated exactly right. And, besides this, the little doll told her how to make, from a certain herb, an ointment which prevented her from ever being sun-burnt. So all the joy in life that came to Wassilissa came to her through the tiny doll that she always carried in her pocket.

Years passed, till Wassilissa grew up and became of an age when it is good to marry. All the young men in the village, high and low, rich and poor, asked for her hand, while not one of them stopped even to look at the stepmother's two daughters, so illfavoured were they. This angered their mother still more against Wassilissa; she answered every gallant who came with the same words: " Never shall the younger be wed before the older ones!" and each time, when she had let a suitor out of the door, she would soothe her anger and hatred by beating her stepdaughter. So while Wassilissa grew each day more lovely and graceful, she was often miserable, and but for the little doll in her pocket, would have longed to leave the white world.

But, sitting lonely, time soon began to hang heavy on her hands. One day she said to the old woman: "It is dull for me, grandmother, to sit idly hour by hour. My hands want work to do. Go, therefore, and buy me some flax, the best and finest to be found anywhere, and at least I can spin."

The old woman hastened and bought some flax of the best sort and Wassilissa sat down to work. So well did she spin that the thread came out as even and fine as a hair, and presently there was enough to begin to weave. But so fine was the thread that no frame could be found to weave it upon, nor would any weaver undertake to make one.

Then Wassilissa went into her closet, took the little doll from her pocket, set food and drink before it and asked its help. And after it had eaten a little and drunk a little, the doll became alive and said: "Bring me an old frame and an old basket and some hairs from a horse's mane, and I will arrange everything for thee." Wassilissa hastened to fetch all the doll had asked for and when evening came, said her prayers, went to sleep, and in the morning she found ready a frame, perfectly made, to weave her fine thread upon.

She wove one month, she wove two months - all the winter Wassilissa sat weaving, weaving her fine thread, till the whole piece of linen was done, of a texture so fine that it could be passed, like thread, through the eye of a needle. When the spring came she bleached it, so white that no snow could be compared with it. Then she said to the old woman: "Take thou the linen to the market, grandmother, and sell it, and the money shall suffice to pay for my food and lodging." When the old woman had examined the linen, however, she said: "Never will I sell such cloth in the market-place; no one should wear it except it be the Tzar himself, and to-morrow I shall carry it to the Palace."

Next day, accordingly, the old woman went to the Tzar's splendid Palace and fell to walking up and down before the windows. The servants came to ask-her her errand but she answered them nothing, and kept walking up and down. At length the Tzar opened his window and asked: "What dost thou want, old woman, that thou walkest here?"

Now there came a time when it became necessary for the merchant to leave his home and to travel to a distant Tzardom. He bade farewell to his wife and her two daughters, kissed Wassilissa and gave her his blessing and departed, bidding them say a prayer each day for his safe return. Scarce was he out of sight of the village however, when his wife sold his house, packed all his goods and moved with them to another dwelling far from the town, in a gloomy neighbourhood on the edge of a wild forest. Here every day, while her two daughters were working indoors, the merchant's wife would send Wassilissa on one errand or other into the forest, either to find a branch of a certain rare bush or to bring her flowers or berries.

Now deep in this forest, as the stepmother well knew, there was a green lawn and on the lawn stood a miserable little hut on hens' legs, where lived a certain Baba-Yaga, an old witch grandmother. She lived alone and none dared go near the hut, for she ate people as one eats chickens. The merchant's wife sent Wassilissa into the forest each day, hoping she might meet the old witch and be devoured; but always the girl came home safe and sound, because the little doll showed her where the bush, the flowers and the berries grew, and did not let her go near the hut that stood on hens' legs. And each time the stepmother hated her more and more because she came to no harm.

One autumn evening the merchant's wife called the three girls to her and gave them each a task. One of her daughters she bade make a piece of lace, the other to knit a pair of hose, and to Wassilissa she gave a basket of flax to be spun. She bade each finish a certain amount. Then she put out all the fires in the house, leaving only a single candle lighted in the room where the three girls worked, and she herself went to sleep.

They worked an hour, they worked two hours, they worked three hours, when one of the elder daughters took up the tongs to straighten the wick of the candle. She pretended to do this awkwardly (as her mother had bidden her) and put the candle out, as if by accident.

"O Tzar's Majesty!" the old woman answered, "I have with me a marvellous piece of linen stuff, so wondrously woven that I will show it to none but thee."

The Tzar bade them bring her before him and when he saw the linen he was struck with astonishment at its fineness and beauty. "What wilt thou take for it, old woman?" he asked.

"There is no price that can buy it, Little Father Tzar," she answered; "but I have brought it to thee as a gift." The Tzar could not thank the old woman enough. He took the linen and sent her to her house with many rich presents.

Seamstresses were called to make shirts for him out of the cloth; but when it had been cut up, so fine was it that no one of them was deft and skilful enough to sew it. The best seamstresses in all the Tzardom were summoned but none dared undertake it. So at last the Tzar sent for the old woman and said: "If thou didst know how to spin such thread and weave such linen, thou must also know how to sew me shirts from it."

And the old woman answered: "O Tzar's Majesty, it was not I who wove the linen; it is the work of my adopted daughter."

"Take it, then," the Tzar said, "and bid her do it for me."

The old woman brought the linen home and told Wassilissa the Tzar's command: "Well I knew that the work would needs be done by my own hands," said Wassilissa, and, locking herself in her own room, began to make the shirts. So fast and well did she work that soon a dozen were ready. Then the old woman carried them to the Tzar, while Wassilissa washed her face, dressed her hair, put on her best gown and sat down at the window to see what would happen. And presently a servant in the livery of the Palace came to the house and entering, said: "The Tzar, our lord, desires himself to see the clever needlewoman who has made his shirts and to reward ber with his own hands."

Wassilissa rose and went at once to the Palace, and as soon as the Tzar saw her, he fell in love with her with all his soul. He took her by her white hand and made her sit beside him. "Beautiful maiden," he said, "never will I part from thee and thou shalt be my wife."

So the Tzar and Wassilissa the Beautiful were married, and her father returned from the far distant kingdom, and he and the old woman lived always with her in the splendid Palace, in all joy and contentment. And as for the little wooden doll, she carried it about with her in her pocket all her life long.

"What are we to do now ?" asked her sister. " The fires are all out, there is no other light in all the house, and our tasks are not done."

"We must go and fetch fire," said the first. " The only house near is a hut in the forest, where a Baba-Yaga lives. One of us must go and borrow fire from her."

"I have enough light from my steel pins," said the one who was making the lace," and I will not go."

"And I have plenty of light from my silver needles," said the other, who was knitting the hose," and I will not go."

"Thou, Wassilissa," they both said, "shalt go and fetch the fire, for thou hast neither steel pins nor silver needles and cannot see to spin thy flax!" They both rose up, pushed Wassilissa out of the house and locked the door, crying: "Thou shalt not come in till thou hast fetched the fire."

Wassilissa sat down on the doorstep, took the tiny doll from one pocket and from another the supper she had ready for it, put the food before it and said: "There, my little doll, take it. Eat a little and listen to my sorrow. I must go to the hut of the old Baba-Yaga in the dark forest to borrow some fire and I fear she will eat me. Tell me! What shall I do?"

Then the doll's eyes began to shine like two stars and it became alive. It ate a little and said: "Do not fear, little Wassilissa. Go where thou hast been sent. While I am with thee no harm shall come to thee from the old witch." So Wassilissa put the doll back into her pocket, crossed herself and started out into the dark, wild forest.

Whether she walked a short way or a long way the telling is easy, but the journey was hard. The wood was very dark, and she could not help trembling from fear. Suddenly she heard the sound of a horse's hoofs and a man on horseback galloped past her. He was dressed al1 in white, the horse under him was milk-white and the harness was white, and just as he passed her it became twilight.

She went a little further and again she heard the sound of a horse's hoofs and there came another man on horseback galloping past her. He was dressed all in red, and the horse under him was blood-red and its harness was red, and just as he passed her the sun rose.