



The Mother of the Sea, or the Story of Yianko

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Greek

5 min read

Once upon a time there was a fisherman who had no children, and on that account he was sad and discontented. He became, too, very unlucky. If he cast his nets he never caught any fish. The first time he brought them up empty; the second time they were full of seaweed. The third time they were very heavy, and he said to himself, "Ah! now they must be full of fish!"

He drew them, but they were full of sand and mud. So it happened for a month and more, though now and again he would find a small sea-gudgeon hidden in the mud. His poor wife waited every evening in the hope that he would bring something home, and despaired every time when it was only a small gudgeon to cook on the gridiron. What could that avail them? They were hungry and had no bread.

One day, when he had cast his nets, and left them a long time in the sea, he had much difficulty in drawing them up; but again he found only quantities of stones and mud, and his nets torn to pieces. "Ach! Act!" he sighed, as he sat in his boat. Then came there up the Mother of the Sea on the foam, and said to him, "Why dost thou sigh so deeply? Thy sighs wither the very trees!"

"I am in despair because for a month and more I have cast my nets without being able to take a single fish. I

have no bread to eat, and now my nets are all torn to pieces.”

“If you will promise me to bring up a son, well taught and well nourished, and when he is eighteen years of age to bring him to me on the beach as a husband for my youngest daughter—for the two eldest are already married—you will catch plenty of fish.”

“But I have no children!”

“Give me thy word, and that will be my business.” He gave his word, thinking, “What does it matter to me what I promise, who have not so much as a puppy dog!” He patched up his nets as well as he could, threw them again, and with that one cast caught a boatload of fish. Having sold them, he went home with his handkerchief full of gold pieces, bought new nets, plenty of bread and meat, wine even, the utmost he could desire. On the following day he cast his new nets, and caught as much fish; and again he gained a handkerchief full of money. Thus it was day after day, and, as the way of the world is, the other fishermen became jealous of him. But soon the fishermen’s wives were jealous too. Months came and months went, the goodwife was full of joy that she was at last to have a child after she had given up all hope of one. But the fisherman was sad.

His wife asked him, “Why, my good man, other people have half a score of children, and don’t trouble about it, and we who have wished so much to have a child, should we not thank God instead of being sad?”

“How shall I tell you, wife? The Mother of the Sea made me take an oath to her, and that is why I take so many fish.”

The woman was much distressed, but what could she do?—he had promised. Soon afterwards a son was born to them, and they christened him Yidnko, and he was a most beautiful child. They brought him up like the son of a noble, for they were now rich; they sent him to school, and he became a great scholar. When he was eighteen years of age, the Mother of the Sea came out again on the foam, and said to the fisherman, “It is time to bring me the boy.”

He returned home, took a sack, and said to his son, "Follow me!" He took him down to the water's edge, got into the boat, and said to him, "I am going to fish; do thou gather seaweed here and fill the sack, and stay with it till I return." So the fisherman went in his boat to the deep waters, and said to the Mother of the Sea, "I have brought the boy to the beach, and you may go and take him."

The Sea then threw herself upon him to seize him as he gathered the seaweed. But he, being wide-awake, and seeing the huge wave coming, fled, and the Sea followed him. He took to the fields, and the Sea chased him till he came to a high mountain which she could not climb. So the Sea returned and let him escape. The fisherman asked her, "Eh, did you find the boy?"

"He fled, but I shall catch him yet. Will he not come back to the beach? You have not wronged me, you shall catch fish as before."

The youth descended the mountain on the farther side, climbed another, and went on, and on. Presently he saw an eagle and a lion quarreling over a dying ass. When they saw the youth, they called to him—for at that time even the animals talked, so they say — "Come and divide it for us!" So Yianko takes out his knife, stabs the ass, and kills it, takes out the bones and gives them to the lion, and the eagle eats the flesh. Then they say to him, "What favour dost thou ask of us?"

He, desiring nothing, said, "What can I expect from you?" Then the eagle plucked a feather from his breast, and said, "Take care of this feather, and thou wilt not repent it. Whenever thou wilt, thou may'st become an eagle, and, when thou wilt, again a man." And the lion pulled out from his mane a hair, and said, "Keep this hair, and when thou shalt burn it, I will gather together all the other lions, and we will do thy bidding."

The youth hid the hair and the feather safely away in his girdle, and again he put the road before him. At night he slept under a tree. One day he met a shepherd, and greeted him: "Good day to you! Will you take me to tend your sheep, that I may earn my bread?" These flocks belong to the King, and the palace is five hours' journey away. I may not take them nearer, because it is all gardens and fields belong to other people, which are sown and planted at this season, and there is no pasture to be found there. Every morning I carry them a big skin of milk which the King's daughter likes better than anything, and she likes it to be warm. If thou art active, and canst hop like a bird, I will take thee with me."

"I can do more than that, for I can let her have it with the froth still upon it." So the shepherd took him home, and they ate together, and then they slept. While it was still night he milked the skin full, and then said to the youth, "Off with thee, this is thine only business!" The youth set off, and when he had gone a little way, he took out the feather and called "Eagle!" He became an eagle, and in the early morning he arrived with the froth still upon the milk. He became a man again, and went upstairs. When the Princess saw him, she looked at him closely, and was more pleased than I can tell you. Said she, "This is the first time I have seen thee?" "Your shepherd has taken me as his servant, my Princess, to bring the milk to you." She asked him a great many questions, for he was handsome, and she had taken a fancy to him.

So not to make a long story of it, he carried the milk to her every day as fresh as fresh could be. The Princess always received him kindly and gave him pocket-money in secret. And wasn't he just as fond of her? He observed her fancy for him, and her notice of him, but was shamefaced, because he was but a shepherd. What stratagem does he resort to? He takes a sackful of grain and throws it on an ants' nest. The ants come swarming out and carry it into their hole. Then they ask him, "What favour desirest thou in return for what thou hast done for us?"

"Only that I may become, whenever I wish, an ant, like you."

The King of the ants pulled out one of his wings and gave it to him, saying, "Take care of it, and whenever thou wilt thou canst become an ant." He takes it and goes at night to the outside of the palace, cries, "Ant!" and at once he was changed into an ant. The youth crept into a cranny of the palace-wall, and entered the Princess's chamber. He saw her lying asleep, and at each corner of her bed hung a lighted lamp. He became a man, put out the lamps, went to the Princess and kissed her.

She awoke and screamed, and he again became an ant. Her father, the King, gets up from his bed, and going to her room with a candle, he asks, "Why didst thou scream?" "Someone kissed me!" The King searched here and there—(how should he find the man when he had changed into an ant, and was hidden in a chink of the floor?)— and then said, "Thou must have fancied it, my girl," and went back to his own chamber and lay down. After a little while the ant again became a youth, and he pinched her cheek, and again she screamed, and again the King came in. "What is the matter?"

"A man pinched me ! ' He looks about, but there was nobody, for the youth had again become an ant." Thou hast been dreaming, my child, and awoke out of thy sleep, and hast spoilt my rest too," he said grumblingly, and went away. After a little while Yianko again took his own shape, and caressed the Princess. Once more she screamed, and once more Yianko was an ant in the cranny, so that he might not be trod upon.

Again the King rises from his bed. "What is the matter again that thou screamst? "Papa, I felt a man's hand caressing me!" Again the King searched, but found nothing. "Where then is the man?" he asked. "The doors are all locked, where could he have gone Every hour thou wakest me up unnecessarily until I am itching with sleepiness; if thou screamest again I shall whip thee, a thing I have never yet done!"

And again he goes back to his chamber. Once more the ant becomes a man ; he finds the tinder-box —that was how they struck a light then —and rekindled the lamps, for he knew that if the Princess were again frightened she would call out. When she saw him she said softly, "My Yianko, was it thou, and all the time I knew it not? Where didst thou hide thyself?"

Then he related everything to her—how that the Sea had come forth to take him away; how he had fled, and she had pursued him as far as the mountain ; how he had the eagle's feather and the ant's wing, and how everything had happened. Then she understood that it was by becoming an eagle that he had been able to bring

the milk to her so quickly with the froth upon it, and by becoming an ant, that her father had not seen him. Then they lay down in each other's arms and slept, and in the morning she went to her parents and said, "I want this one for my husband."

"What? this lad, my daughter?—this shepherd lad, when so many others are asking for you?"

But when they saw her determination, they consented, so as not to lose her love, and married her with great pomp, and many guests were invited to the wedding. Then the shepherd found out where Yianko had been all the day and night that he had been missing. Now, however, he was dressed like a prince, and went out with his wife, and she loved him to distraction.

One day he sees the King pensive, and says to him, "What is the matter, father-in-law, why are you sad?" I have a quarrel with another King, and he has declared war against me, and I find that I am not prepared for war, neither have I many troops."

"And are you going to wait, father-in-law, until they arrive here? We will go forward and fight against them in the name of God."

So he persuaded the King, and they made ready and set out together with the troops. Then the Princess fell upon her father's neck, saying, "Papa, my Yianko—who is dear to thee as thine eyes— see that thou let him not go near the ocean, for fear the Sea should take him from me!"

Then they went away, and met the enemy, and fought with them. Yianko did all in his power ; he rushed on with his sword and slew many ; but they were the more numerous, and it was *alas! for the strong man ivho is seized by two feeble ones!* as the saying is. The enemy had nearly gained the day, and the youth and his father-in-law were sorely pressed, but at that moment he burned the lion's hair, and in a moment all the lions gathered around him, and he cried, "Why wait ye? Fall on the enemy!"

They threw themselves on the foe. Some were wounded, others were killed, and the rest were scattered miserably with their King. And Yianko, on horseback, rode, sword in hand, amid lions, and slew scores of them. When the battle was over, Yianko was about to go and wash in the Sea, which was close by, when his father-in-law called to him, "Where goest thou? Where goest thou?" and prevented him, but gave orders to his men to bring water for him to wash in.

Early the next morning they set out for the capital of the foreign King, and found that he had collected his scattered forces to prevent if possible his capital being taken. So the battle began again, and again Yianko lighted the lion's hair, and the lions fell upon them with Yianko at their head, and they slew all the enemy, and Yianko killed the King with his own sword. Again he ran, all bloodstained, to the Sea to wash. His father-in-law, overjoyed at the victory, forgot to warn him, and as soon as the youth reached the margin and dipped his hand in the water, the Sea threw herself upon him, and drew him in. His father-in-law waited for him ; but as Yianko did not return he went to the beach in the hope of overtaking and warning him, but saw nothing of him. Then he concluded that the Sea must have taken him ; and he who had been so joyful was consumed with sorrow, because he had lost his son who had been the hero and the victor in the battle; and he returned to the palace full of grief.

Seeing him come back alone and without Yianko, his daughter lost her senses, and, tearing her hair, she cried, "Little Papa, I will go and seek my husband, but you must get ready for me a great ship with three decks and forty youths and forty maidens; you must give me also three golden apples, and I will go in the ship."

"Bravo, my daughter, for he is the man who not only saved my life, but brought me out with a white face. All that thou wouldst do is befitting, God grant thou find him."

He got ready for her the three-decked ship, put on board the forty youths with various kinds of music, and forty maidens to wait upon the Princess, ordered them to make for her three large apples of gold, and she embarked. They set sail, and go forth on the ocean. The Princess bids the maidens sing, and the youths accompany them on their instruments. She holds an apple in her hand and plays with it. Then up comes the Mother of the Sea, and says to her, "What a grand conceit, bless your eyes! Give me that golden apple to take to my eldest daughter who has smelt it, and I will give you what you will"

“I am a King’s daughter, and Yianko, whom you took away, was my husband. Put out his head only for me to see, and I will give you the apple.” The Mother of the Sea put out the head of her son-in-law, and when he saw the Princess his heart went out of him and he sank. Then the Princess threw the apple into the sea. The ship sailed away. After awhile the Princess bade them begin to sing again, and she played with the second golden apple. T

he Mother of the Sea again came up, and said, “Give me, Princess, the apple, my second daughter longs for it.”

“If you will let me see my Yianko down to his waist, I will give it to you.” She throws her the apple, and the Mother of the Sea brings up Yianko as far as his waist, and he saw his wife, and his heart fluttered and again he was lost to sight. The ship sailed on. Presently the Princess again commanded the forty maidens and the forty youths to begin singing, and she held the third apple in her hand and played with it. The Mother of the Sea came out again, and said, “For God’s sake, my Princess, my third daughter who has married Yianko and who is ill has smelt the apple, give it to her that she may not die.”

“Show me the whole of Yianko erect and free from your hands, and I will give it.”

“That I will,” says she. The Mother of the Sea took the apple, and raised up Yianko erect and free.



“He cried “Eagle!” and became an eagle, and flew into the ship.” Illustration by Edwin Norbury, published in Greek Wonder Tales by Lucy Mary Jane Garnett (1913), A. and. C. Black.

When he no longer felt the Sea flowing above him, he cried “Eagle!” and became an eagle, and flew into the ship, and went below to the cabin, and became a man again, and the Princess followed him. A mad wind arose and the waves washed over the vessel ; but he was shut up in the cabin, and the Sea could not get hold of him. Thanks to the worthy captain and the good ship they weathered the storm, and cast anchor and came safely ashore when within an inch of drowning. Then they travelled for two days and nights till they came again to the palace. From this time Yianko remembered never again to go near the Sea. And he became King when his father-in-law died. And the Princess and he lived and grew old, and brought up their children.

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