

The Ukrainian folktale, called “Nastasia of the Sea,” concerns a young man, madly in love with a mermaid, who must complete a series of seemingly impossible tasks before he can win her love. As in many fairy tales, magical talking animals and the number three are significant elements in this tale. This version is based on a Kozak (Cossack) tale retold by Mary pope Osborne in *Mermaid Tales from Around the World* (Scholastic, 1993; available from the Lancaster County Library). The Kozaks lived in an area of Ukraine located about 60 miles west of the city of Donetsk (home to the professional dancers seen in *The Nutcracker* at LMHS). The Kozaks were a warriors, they rode their horses into battle to defend Ukraine against invasions from Poland, Russia, and the Tartars from about 1500 through the 1700s. Because of the importance of horses to the Kozaks, these animals figure prominently in the following tale. The name of this tale’s hero, Tremsin, rhymes with “crimson.”

MOST-LOVELY NASTASIA OF THE SEA

Long ago in Ukraine, Farmer and his Wife went to work in their field, taking Baby with them. They laid him in soft grass nearby and set to work. Once their backs were turned, Eagle flew down from the sky, snatched Baby, and flew away!

Eagle took the baby to his nest, naming him Tremsin and caring for him. By Tremsin’s sixteenth birthday, he had grown too big for Eagle’s nest. So Eagle kicked Tremsin out of the nest and told him, “The time has come for you to make your own way in the world.” Tremsin lay on the ground where he landed, feeling quite frightened. Because he did not know how to even begin to find his own way in the world, he began to cry.

“What is the problem?” he heard a voice ask. Tremsin looked up, but the only creature nearby was a horse. How could a horse help him? Since no one else was around, Tremsin decided to see what the horse might tell him.

“I don’t know what to do!” wailed Tremsin. “How shall I ever find my own way in the world?”

“I don’t know,” said Horse.

Despite Horse’s lack of help in this instance, Tremsin decided to travel with Horse, as a talking horse might be good company on the road. Tremsin and Horse traveled together through the countryside of Ukraine.

One day, Tremsin and Horse came to the house of Nobleman, who was very rich. Tremsin was given work in Nobleman’s stables. Tremsin brushed Nobleman’s horses till their coats shone like polished silver. The other stable boys became very jealous. They wanted to get rid of Tremsin, so they went to Nobleman and told him, “Tremsin says he can get Most-Lovely Nastasia of the Sea, the mermaid.”

Nobleman sent for poor Tremsin once more. “Tremsin,” he said, “Capture Most-Lovely Nastasia of the Sea and bring her to me!”

Horrified, Tremsin replied, “Most gracious Sir! I cannot do this!”

“Do it, or I shall cut off your head!”

Tremsin sought his friend Horse.

“Why are you crying?” asked Horse.

When Tremsin explained that he had to capture Most-Lovely Nastasia of the Sea, Horse shook his head. “Tremsin, Tremsin, this is not a big task. All you have to do is this: Set up a white tent on the shore by the sea. Fill it with lovely things to entice Nastasia out of the sea. Then sit nearby and wait for her to come up out of the sea.”

So Tremsin followed Horse’s directions. He set up the tent, filled it with colorful scarves, shining trinkets, and delicious fruits. Then he hid nearby.

Sure enough, Most-Lovely Nastasia emerged from the sea and entered the tent. After trying on the scarves and trinkets, she ate her fill of the fruit. Then she lay down inside the tent and fell asleep.

Tremsin could hardly believe his luck. For once, it seemed Horse was right. This was a simple task. Tremsin crept into the tent, picked up Most-Lovely Nastasia of the Sea and carried her back to Nobleman’s House. Nobleman was so pleased that he let Tremsin keep Most-Lovely Nastasia.

Once again, Tremsin could not believe his luck. For he had fallen in love with Most-Lovely Nastasia.

But the mermaid did not seem to like Tremsin. “You captured me, but you did not capture my love,” Most-Lovely Nastasia said nastily. “If you want my love, you must get my coral necklace from the sea.”

“Oh, but that is an impossible task!” he cried. Once again, he sought comfort from his friend Horse.

“Oh, Tremsin, Tremsin, Tremsin! This not an impossible task, but an impossibly easy one! Just watch for a crab to crawl out of the water, then say, ‘I’ll catch you!’”

Tremsin by now believed that his good friend Horse knew what he was talking about. So Tremsin returned to the seashore to wait for a crab. Pretty soon, he saw a crab at the water’s edge.

Tremsin called out, “I’ll catch you!”

“Oh, please don’t” answered Crab. “If you let me go, I’ll get you anything you need!”

Tremsin knew what to say. “Fetch me the coral necklace of Most-Lovely Nastasia of the Sea.”

Crab gathered her children around and told them, “Gather all of the coral under the sea and bring it to Tremsin.”

Crab’s children busily gathered coral and piled it on the beach in front of Tremsin. Finally, the youngest crab dragged a coral necklace onto shore. Shouting his thanks behind him, Tremsin hurried to Nastasia with the necklace.

“Thank you,” Most-Lovely Nastasia said haughtily. “You have captured me and you have retrieved my necklace. But if you want my love, you must gather my herd of wild horses from the sea.”

As soon as he heard “horses,” Tremsin knew who to run to.

“Oh, Tremsin,” sighed Horse, “I fear that this is no simple task.”

This is not at all what Tremsin expected to hear from his trusty Horse, who always told him how easy things would be. “Just do you mean by that?” Tremsin asked, rather testily.

“Well,” said Horse, “Most-Lovely Nastasia has a Most-Unlovely Mare!”

“This is not what I wanted to hear!” cried Tremsin.

“Let me see what I can do,” said Horse. He thought about it, then said, “Get twenty animal hides and load them on my back. Then get a whip and take me down to the seashore.”

Tremsin did as he was told. When he and Horse arrived at the seashore, Horse said, “I’ll swim out to Nastasia’s herd of seahorses and bring them back. When you see Most-Lovely Nastasia’s Most-Unlovely Mare coming up behind me, crack her forehead with your whip!”

Tremsin waited on shore while his faithful Horse swam out to the herd of sea-horses. But when Nastasia’s Mare saw Horse, she reared up out of the waves and began to chase after Horse, with the rest of Nastasia’s herd following.

Mare gained on Horse, then caught up with him. She tried to bite Horse, but her teeth sank into one of the hides on his back instead. Mare threw the hide away and tried to catch Horse again. But she bit into another hide, which she tossed aside. This happened twenty times, with Horse managing to stay just ahead of Mare as they raced across the waves.

Finally, Horse ran up onto shore, with Mare directly behind him. Just in time, Tremsin cracked his whip on Mare’s forehead. She instantly halted. Tremsin tossed a halter over her, mounted her, and drove Nastasia’s herd of seahorses out of the water and onto the shore.

“Your wild seahorses!” he announced proudly to the bored-looking Nastasia.

“Oh, thanks,” she sighed. “You captured me, my coral necklace, and my seahorses. But there is one more thing you must do before you capture my love.”

“Just one thing?” thought Tremsin. But he braced himself before asking, “What is it? I’ll do anything for you!” For you see, Tremsin was hopelessly in love with Most-Lovely Nastasia.

“You must milk my mare and put her milk into three barrels. In the first barrel, the milk must be boiling hot. In the second, it must be only lukewarm. In the third, it must be ice-cold.”

Tremsin turned to Horse, but before he could open his mouth to speak, Horse said, “Don’t look at me! She said you had to milk that Most-Unlovely Mare!”

Sighing, Tremsin did as Nastasia had ordered.

When all was ready, Tremsin turned eagerly to Nastasia, thinking that at long last, he had won her heart. After all, she had said one more thing.

Seeing the look on Tremsin’s face, she said, “This is a two-part task. You must now jump into and out of each barrel of milk.”

Tremsin looked at Horse.

“Go on, boy. Gather your courage and do as she says to gain your heart’s desire!”

So Tremsin took a deep breath and dove into the boiling hot barrel. When he climbed out, he was an old man. He climbed stiffly into the lukewarm barrel. When he jumped out, he was a little boy. Then he jumped into the icy cold barrel. When he emerged, he was handsome and good beyond description.

Then Most-Lovely Nastasia jumped in and out of the three barrels. When she came out of the first, she was an old woman. When she came out of the second, she was a little girl. And when she

emerged from the third, not only was she more beautiful than before, she was also good-natured beyond description. And she was now in love with Tremsin.

Most-Lovely Nastasia and Tremsin were married. They and their horses lived half of the year under the sea and half of the year on the Ukrainian steppes, which were covered with grasses for the horses to eat. And in both lands, they lived happily ever after.