

The Tale of Yuri and Lada

Once upon a time a young couple named Yuri and Lada lived in Ukraine.

Yuri was as sound as the spring rain and as strong as thunder. His moustache was blond, eyebrows dark, eyes brown, nose aquiline, face oval, cheeks rosy. His fair hair like a lion's mane fell down in waves on his shoulders. He was attired in Hutzul highland costume that shone from afar with crimson, gold and diamonds. And like all the Hutzuls he carried his battle-axe on a long handle.

When he struck with his axe—whether on cloud, rock or spruce tree—lightning would flare up, the thunder roar, the mountains shake and a terrible echo would roll over the vast steppe.

Fair Lada had a round face, cheeks of silk and roses, a small nose, lips red as a cranberry, eyes blue as cornflowers, eyebrows as if beaded on a string. Her hair smoothly adorned her head and fell in two heavy braids over her beautiful shoulders and bosom. She was dressed as a Hutzul girl, but her attire was all embroidered with gold. Even her small moccasins glittered with gold.

In the morning, Lada used to come from her dwelling, made of lazarine crystal, and all Ukraine would be filled with mirth and gladness, just because she would stand smiling and shining with gold on the summit of a mountain. Birds would fly to her singing their praises, and everywhere she went all around her beautiful, fragrant flowers would spring up and bloom in a medley of colours.

The Ukrainian people dwelt in happiness in the time of Yuri and Lada. Yuri protected them with his battle-axe from their bitter foes—Moroz the Frost and Zeema, the Winter Witch—who continually invaded Ukraine, trying with frost and cold to kill the flowers, the birds and men, and to include Ukraine in their Kingdom of Ice. Fearlessly Yuri fought Motley Frost and Witch Zeema, but he could only do it when Lada was with him. Her pleasant smile and the brilliancy of her beauty inspired him to his heroic deeds.

Once Lada went to visit her brother, South, and left Yuri alone. Motley Frost seized this opportunity to do some mischief. Stealthily, from a secret place he attacked Yuri and killed him. Then he rushed down to the South, seized Lada, whom he met as she was making her way back to her husband, took her far away North and hid her in his Ice Castle.

Having done away with Yuri and Lada, Motley Frost let loose from their chains the chilling winds and told them to herd the snowy clouds and stampede them into Ukraine. He himself went there and, assisted by the Witch Zeema, started to freeze rivers, ponds and streams, fill the valleys and canyons with snow, cover the peaks of mountains with a coat of ice. He did all this mischief aiming to kill men, animals, birds, beetles, fish, flowers and every living thing in Ukraine.

Flowers were frozen, their stalks bent down. The dead heads and leaves fell to the ground covering the roots, so that at least these would not perish. The beasts hid in forests and caves. The birds flew away, migrating south to *Virey*—the country of eternal spring. The fish buried themselves in the mud at the bottom of rivers, ponds and streams. Men hid in their huts and mused in terror on what was going to happen to them. They heard the bad news that Motley Frost had killed Yuri and taken Lada away. Often they remembered with sorrow the pleasant life they had led under the protection of their benefactors Yuri and Lada.

While all this was happening, one night Silver Wolf trod across the skies. He peered down toward the earth and saw there at the edge of the forest, in a meadow, the body of Yuri. A few paces away there gleamed Yuri's battle-axe. Silver Wolf jumped down from the sky, carefully looked over the body and ran off to the Black Mountain. There he found springs from which healing and life-giving waters flow. He filled two flasks with the waters and ran back to the body of Yuri. He sprayed it with healing water and it was healed. Yuri jumped to his feet and said, "Oh, how long have I slept!"

“If it weren’t for me you would never have awakened!” replied Silver Wolf, and he told Yuri all that had happened since his death.

Yuri looked around Ukraine and saw what Motley Frost and Witch Zeema had done to his country and people. Pain stabbed his heart. He grieved for Lada and was sorry for his poor suffering people. He would ride to free Lada, but he had no horse.

“Mount me!” said Silver Wolf. “I’ll drive you to where Lada is.” Yuri picked up his axe from the ground, mounted Silver Wolf and they started off.

Yuri rode and rode, when suddenly he saw a falcon on a tree. He took his bow and aimed it at the falcon.

“Grant me my life,” the falcon said to Yuri. “I might be of some service to you.”

Yuri spared the life of the falcon and drove away, again driving Silver Wolf, leaving behind many a mile. They saw a well and stopped for a drink. Yuri dipped some water from the well and was about to drink it when he noticed a large trout in the pail. The trout began to beg, “Throw me back into the well. I might be of some service to you.”

Yuri slipped the trout back into the well and mounted silver Wolf again. This time silver Wolf took the upper path and carried Yuri among the golden stars, toward the Far North, where on a tall iceberg, veiled in the snowy clouds, stood Motley Frost’s Castle of Ice.

Eternal night covered all the North. In the darkness only the immense snowfields could be seen, and the reflection in the skies of the bluish Northern Lights, from the walls of Motley’s castle’s lights—cold as the ice itself, from which the castle was built. The same bluish light was glowing from all the windows of the twelve-storey castle. Only one window shone with gold: there was Lada.

Upon approaching the castle, Yuri leaped down from Silver Wolf and told him to wait. He himself went to the gate of the castle: all the gates and doors were ajar. Motley, knowing that nobody could reach him from the South and that the snowfields and icy mountains sufficiently guarded Lada from escaping, was not afraid to leave the doors open.

Yuri passed from one room to another, from hall to hall, then from floor to floor, but he met no servants. Neither did he see any furniture—only bare walls encrusted with intricate patterns of ice. On the twelfth floor he approached a room whose entrance was draped with seal pelts. Yuri pulled the skins aside and saw Lada sitting on an ice couch all covered with seal pelts. She was sitting and crying, grieving for Yuri, thinking that he was no longer alive, killed by Motley Frost. But suddenly she was surprised to see Yuri shining like a sunbeam through the darkness. Soon, though, her happiness turned to fear for her beloved.

“Why have you come here?” she exclaimed with despair. “He will kill you again!”

“Do not be afraid. Only ask Motley Frost where his death lies.”

Lada and Yuri did not have time to say much more because they could hear Motley Frost returning.

“What shall I do?” exclaimed Yuri.

“Hide there behind the couch and cover yourself with skins.”

Yuri just had time to hide when Motley Frost entered the room. Motley sniffed and roared, “I smell the blood of a Ukrainian! What does this mean?”

“You came from Ukraine. No wonder that you can smell Ukrainian blood,” retorted Lada. She gave him supper and when he was eating she asked him, “Is it true that you have no death?”

Motley grinned. “Eh, I have my death, of course, but it is hidden so well that nobody can find it.”

“Where is it?” asked Lada. “I suppose you are afraid to tell me.”

“Afraid? Of you?” snarled Motley. “Of course not. I’m not afraid of anyone except maybe Yuri, but he is dead.”

“Tell me, then.”

“I am in no hurry.”

“You are only boasting. You are probably afraid or don’t know.”

“I do know!” roared Motley.

“No, you don’t know.”

“Yes, I do know and to prove to you that I am not afraid of you, listen! Out in the southwest, on the shores of the Vikings, there stands a thousand-year-old oak. Under it there is an iron chest, and in the chest there is a rabbit. In this rabbit there is a duck, in the duck there is an egg and in the egg is my death! He who breaks this egg will bring death upon me!”

Yuri, still lying under the pelts, listened closely and remembered everything. As soon as Motley finished his supper, Lada let Yuri out and he once more set off for Ukraine. He bade her good-bye, told her he would return soon, mounted Silver Wolf and was off to the Vikings’ Sea.

Silver Wolf knew the old oak tree so they had no difficulty finding it. Yuri swung his battle-axe and hit the oak. Thunder roared, lightning struck, chips flew in all directions—but the oak withstood the mighty blow. Yuri had to hit the oak several times with his axe before it fell and when it crashed to the ground, the earth shook as though there had been an earthquake. In the stump there was a chest. Yuri opened it and from it jumped a rabbit that ran toward the forest. Silver Wolf ran after him, caught him and tore him in half. A duck flew out of the rabbit up to the skies and over the Vikings’ Sea.

Said Yuri, scratching his head, “All that work came to nothing!”

Hardly had he finished saying this when the falcon, to whom Yuri had granted his life, rose high above the duck. Like lightning he struck down on her, his sharp talons seizing her fast. The sigh of relief breathed by Yuri had not time to disappear when he saw that the duck had dropped the egg and it had disappeared into the Vikings' Sea, sinking to the bottom.

"From bad to worse!" exclaimed Yuri.

He was about to turn around and summon Silver Wolf when the trout that Yuri had thrown back into the well approached the shore, holding the egg in his mouth. Yuri rejoiced. He thanked the falcon and the trout warmly for their help, mounted Silver Wolf and started off north to the castle of Motley Frost.

He approached the castle, went straight to the twelfth floor and entered Lada's room. Motley was there, too.

"Ah, vagabond!" shouted Motley. "You came here looking for your death!"

"Not mine—but yours!" Yuri replied, showing him the egg. Motley looked at it and winced.

"Dear Yurechko," he mumbled. "Do be nice. Be careful with that egg. Do not play with it! Give it to me. Take Lada and you may go. I will not disturb you any more. I am granting the lives of both of you—only give me that egg!"

"No, monster!" replied Yuri. "You have brought enough evil to the Earth and my Ukrainian people. Vanish!" Saying this, Yuri threw the egg down and broke it. Motley Frost screamed and melted into water.

With Motley's death a warm wind came from the South and started to thaw Motley's castle. The attire of Lada shone with great brilliancy. Lada and Yuri mounted Silver Wolf, who rose high up to the skies and sped with them to Ukraine.

Witch Zeema, when she found out about the death of Motley Frost, flew away in haste from Ukraine.

In Ukraine it became warmer and warmer, brighter and brighter from day to day. The flocks of birds returned from the South, filling the air with their songs, chirping everywhere they went, spreading the news that Lada and Yuri were returning to Ukraine.

The Ukrainian people saw the change in nature and left their huts. The older people looked at the sun while shielding their eyes and said, "Be of good cheer, children. Yuri and Lada are returning to us." Everywhere as Yuri and Lada passed on their way home, the flowers frozen by Motley Frost revived, opening their beautiful petals and covering the mountains and the valleys and the endless Ukrainian steppes with their carpet of many-coloured blooms. The grass grew, foliage covered the trees; the bees buzzed, the butterflies merrily flitted from flower to flower; the fish joyfully splashed in the water; deer and elk gathered to be patted by Lada; birds sang greetings to Lada and her beloved husband.

Girls ran in gay crowds to the forests and meadows to sing their spring song to Lada.

"O spring, our little Lady,

Where did you spend the winter?

In a forest, under an old oak tree,

I spun the threads for my shirt."