

Golden Hair

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Easy

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Once there lived a king who was so clever that he could understand all that the animals said to one another. Listen how he came to know this. One day an old woman brought him a snake in a basket, and said if he would have it cooked, and would eat it, he would understand what the animals and living creatures, whether on land, in the air, or in the water, said. The king was pleased at the idea of knowing more than any other man, paid the old woman well for her present, and ordered one of his servants to cook the “fish” immediately for dinner.

“But mind,” added the king, “you do not taste it; if you do you will answer to me for it with your head;”

Irik, the servant, thought it very strange that the king should forbid him so strongly to taste the dish.

“As long as I have lived,” he said to himself, “I never saw such a fish; it looks more like a snake. Besides, how is a cook to prepare food without tasting it?”

When the snake was ready he ate a piece of it, just to try its flavour. Suddenly he heard something buzzing round his ears:—

“A piece for me! a piece for me!”

Irik looked round, but there was no one near, except a few flies darting about the kitchen. Then he heard a

hoarse voice outside in the street:—

“Where are you going to? Where are you going to?”

And then various other voices answered,—

“To the miller’s barley. To the miller’s barley.”

And looking out of the window he saw a gander with a flock of geese.

“O-ho!” said he to himself, “that’s the ‘fish,’ is it?”

He understood the whole thing at once. He quickly ate another piece, and then, as if nothing had happened, took the dish to the king.

After dinner the king ordered Irik to saddle two horses, and accompany him on a ride. The king went on before, Irik following him. As they rode through a green meadow Irik’s horse gave a bound, and said,—

“Ho, ho, brother, I feel so light! I should like to jump over the hills!”

“Ah,” said the other horse, “I, too, should like to jump. But I am mounted by an old man, and if I were to jump he would tumble off to the ground like a full sack, and break his neck.”

“And let him break it,” said Irik’s horse, “it does not matter. Instead of an old you would have a young master.”

During this conversation Irik laughed heartily, but quietly, lest the king should hear him. The king well understood what the horses had said. He turned round, and, seeing Irik laughing, cried,—

“What are you laughing at?”

“Nothing, your majesty,” Irik excused himself; “only something that came into my mind.”

The old king, however, began to suspect him, and being afraid of the horses he returned home.

Upon reaching the palace, the king ordered Irik to pour him out a glass of wine.

“But you will lose your head,” added the king, “if you pour either too much or too little.”

Irik took a bottle and began to pour out the wine. Suddenly two birds flew through a window into the room. One was pursuing the other, and the first held three golden hairs in its beak.

“Give them to me!” cried the second, “they are mine!”

“No,” answered the first, “they are mine, I picked them up.”

“But I saw them falling on the ground when the maiden with the golden locks was combing her hair. Give me at least two of them.”

“No, not one.”

Hereupon the second bird flew upon the first, and seized the three hairs of gold. Then they began to struggle for them; at last each bird got one of the three hairs in its beak, and the third one fell upon the floor with a ringing sound.

Irik looked at it, and spilt the wine.

“You have forfeited your head!” thundered out the king; “but I will be merciful to you if you find the maiden with the golden locks, and bring her to me for my wife.”

What was Irik to do? If he would save his life he must go and look for this maiden, although he did not know where to seek her. He saddled his horse, and started at haphazard. He came to a dense forest; near this forest, just by the side of the road, a bush was burning. Some shepherd boys had lighted it. Under the bush was an ants' nest; the sparks were falling upon it, and the ants, carrying their white eggs, were running in all directions.

“Oh, help, Irik, help!” they cried piteously, “or we and our young ones yet unhatched will perish!”

Irik quickly dismounted, removed the bush, and put out the fire.

“When you are in trouble,” said the ants, “think of us, and we will help you.”

Then he rode through the forest and approached a high fir-tree. On the top of it was a raven's nest; and under the tree lay two young ravens screaming and complaining.

"Father and mother have flown away from us. We are too young to search for food for ourselves, for we poor chickens cannot even fly. Oh, help, Irik, help! Give us something to eat or we shall die of hunger."

Irik did not think long; he dismounted from his horse and thrust a sword into its side, that the ravens might have something to eat.

"When you are in trouble," croaked the ravens joyfully, "think of us, and we will help you."

Irik was now obliged to travel on foot. He walked for a long time through the forest, and when at last he came out of it he saw a broad sea before him. Two fishermen were quarrelling on the shore. They had caught a large yellow fish in a net, and each of them wanted to keep it.

"Mine is the net, and mine is the fish," cried one.

"Your net would have been of little use to you had it not been for my boat and help," said the other.

"When we catch another one like this you shall have it."

"No; you wait for that one, and let me have this."

"Let me settle your dispute," said Irik. "Sell the fish to me, and I will pay you well for it; then divide the money, equally between you."

He gave them all the money he had received from the king for his journey, not keeping anything for himself. The fishermen were pleased with the bargain, and Irik let the fish go into the sea. The fish swam joyfully in the water, dived, and not far from land showed its head again, and said,—

"When you want help, Irik, think of me, and I will repay your kindness."

It then disappeared beneath the waves.

“Where are you going?” asked the fishermen of Irik.

“I am going to fetch a young bride, the maiden with the golden locks, for the old king my master; but I know not where to find her.”

“We can tell you something about her,” said the fishermen. “It is Zlatovlaska—Golden Hair; she is the daughter of the king of the Palace of Crystal, who lives on yonder island. Every morning, at the break of day, she combs her golden locks; its brightness is reflected on the sea, and up among the clouds. If you like, we will row you over to the island, because you have settled our dispute so pleasantly. Take care, however, to choose the right princess; the king has twelve daughters, but only one of them has locks of gold.”

When Irik arrived on the island he went to the Palace of Crystal, and begged the king to give him his daughter with the golden hair as a wife for his own master.

“I will,” answered the king; “but you must serve for her. You must in three days perform three tasks which I will give you—one for each day. Meanwhile you can rest yourself until to-morrow.”

Early next morning the king said to Irik, “My daughter Zlatovlaska had a costly pearl necklace; the string broke, and the pearls dropped off, and were scattered in the long grass of the meadow. You must gather these pearls together: not one must be missing.”

Irik went into the meadow, it was wide and long; he knelt down in the grass, and began to search for the pearls. He searched from morning until mid-day, but could not find a single one.

“Oh that my ants were here!” he cried; “they would help me.”

“We are here to help you,” cried the ants, who suddenly appeared from somewhere, and ran to him from all sides. “What do you want?”

“I have to gather many pearls together in this meadow, and I cannot even find one.”

“Wait a moment, we will collect them for you.”

In a short time the ants brought Irik a great number of pearls from among the grass, and he had nothing to do

but to thread them on a piece of string. Just as Irik was about to tie the ends there came crawling to him a lame ant, whose leg had been burnt off when the ant-hill was in the midst of the fire, and cried,—

“Stop, Irik, stop! Don’t tie the thread yet; I have brought you one pearl more.”

Irik took the pearls to the king, and when the king had counted them there was not one missing.

“You have done your task well,” said the king; “to-morrow morning I will give you some other work to do.”

In the morning Irik presented himself to the king, and the king said to him, “My daughter with the golden locks, while bathing in the sea, lost her gold ring. You must find it, and bring it here.”

Irik went to the sea, and, full of sorrow, wandered on the shore. The sea was clear, but so deep that he could not see the bottom. How then was he to find the ring?

“Would that my gold-fish were here!” cried Irik; “it would help me.”

Suddenly something bright appeared in the sea, and then the gold-fish came up to the surface.

“I am here to help you. What do you want?”

“I have to find a gold ring in the sea, and I cannot even see the bottom of it.”

“This very instant I met a pike carrying a gold ring in its fins. Wait a moment, and I will bring it to you.”

Soon afterwards the gold-fish appeared, bringing the pike with the ring.

The king again praised Irik for having done his work so well, and on the following morning gave him the third task.

“If you wish me to give you my daughter with the golden locks for a wife for your king, you must bring her some water of death and some water of life, they will be wanted.”

Irik did not know where to seek for these waters. He walked where chance led him, until he came to a dark forest.

“Would that my ravens were here; they would help me.”

Suddenly a noise was heard over his head, and the two ravens appeared.

“We are here to help you. What do you want?”

“I have to fetch some of the water of death and some of the water of life, and know not where to get them.”

“We know where to get them. Wait a moment, and we will bring you some.”

In a short time the ravens returned to Irik, each carrying a small gourd bottle; in one was the water of life, in the other the water of death.

Irik, delighted with his good fortune, hastened back to the palace. On the skirt of the forest he saw a spider’s web spread from one fir-tree to another; in the middle of it sat a large spider killing a fly. Irik took the gourd bottle with the water of death, sprinkled it over the spider, and it fell to the ground like a ripe cherry; it was quite dead. Then he sprinkled the fly with the water of life from the other bottle, and the fly began to struggle; in a short time it disentangled itself from the spider’s web, and flew into the air.

“It is your good fortune, Irik, that you have brought me to life again,” buzzed the fly in his ears. “Without my assistance you would never guess which one of the twelve maidens is the princess with the locks of gold.”

When the king saw that Irik had also accomplished the third task, he said he would give him his daughter Zlatovlaska.

“But,” added the king, “you must find her out yourself.”

Then the king took him to a large hall, in the middle of which stood a table, and around it sat twelve beautiful girls, all exactly alike; each of them had a long cloth, as white as snow, thrown over her head and reaching to the ground, so that it was impossible to see what kind of hair she had.

“These are my daughters,” said the king; “if you can find out which of them is Zlatovlaska, you will have won her, and may lead her away at once. If you cannot point her out, she is not destined for you, and you must leave this place without her.” Irik was in the greatest trouble, and did not know what to do. All at once something

whispered in his ear:—

“Bz—bz! go round the table, and I will tell you which one it is.”

It was the fly which Irik had rescued from death with the water of life.

“This is not the one—nor this—nor this;—but this is Zlatovlaska!”

“Give me this one from among your daughters,” cried Irik. “I have won her for my master!”

“You have chosen rightly,” said the king. The princess rose immediately from the table, and removed the head-dress, and showed her golden hair, flowing in thick locks down to the ground; it was as bright as the rising sun! Irik was almost blinded by its radiance. Then the king arrayed his daughter for her journey, according to her high birth and station, and Irik took her to his master to become his wife. The old king’s eyes sparkled, and he leapt with joy when he saw Zlatovlaska; he ordered immediate preparations to be made for the wedding.

“I intended to have you hanged for your disobedience, that the ravens might eat you,” he said to Irik; “but since you have served me so well, I will only have you beheaded and decently buried.”

After the execution, Zlatovlaska asked the old king for the dead body of Irik, and as the king could not very well refuse anything to his bride, he sent it to her. The princess joined the head to the trunk, sprinkled some of the water of death over them, and they immediately grew together so exactly that there was not even a mark left of the decapitation. Then she sprinkled the body with the water of life, and Irik got up as fresh as if he were newly born, and as hale as a deer; youth bloomed in his face.

“How soundly I have slept!” said Irik, rubbing his eyes.

“Yes,” said the princess, “you have slept soundly. Had it not been for me, you would have slept long enough.”

When the old king saw that Irik was alive, and had become younger and handsomer than before, he, too, wanted to be made young again. He immediately directed that the same should be done to him as had been done to Irik. Accordingly they beheaded him, and then sprinkled the body with the water of life over and over again, until there was no more left. But the head would not grow to the trunk. Then they sprinkled it with the water of death, and the head grew immediately to the trunk. But the old king remained dead, for there was no

water wherewith to bring him to life again!

But as the kingdom could not remain without a sovereign; and as there was no one so wise as Irik, who understood the language of the brutes and other living creatures, the people made him their king and the Princess Zlatovlaska their queen.

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