

# Goldenhair

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*Intermediate*

*15 min read*

There was a king who was so clever that he understood all animals, and knew what they said to each other. Hear how he learnt it. Once upon a time there came to him a little old woman, who brought him a snake in a basket, and told him to have it cooked for him; if he dined off it, he would understand what any animal in the air, on the earth, or in the water said. The king liked the idea of understanding what nobody else understood, paid the old woman well, and forth-with ordered his servant to cook the fish for dinner. 'But,' said he, 'be sure you don't take a morsel of it even on your tongue, else you shall pay for it with your head.'

George, the servant, thought it odd that the king forbade him so energetically to do this. 'In my life I never saw such a fish,' said he to himself; 'it looks just like a snake! And what sort of cook would that be who didn't take a taste of what he was cooking?' When it was cooked, he took a morsel on his tongue, and tasted it. Thereupon he heard something buzzing round his ears: 'Some for us, too!

some for us, too!' George looked round, and saw nothing but some flies that were flying about in the kitchen. Again somebody called with a hissing voice in the street outside: 'Where are you going? where are you going?' And shriller voices answered: 'To the miller's barley! to the miller's barley!' George peeped through the window, and saw a gander and a flock of geese. 'Aha!' said he; 'that's the kind of fish it is.' Now he knew what it was. He hastily thrust one more morsel into his month, and carried the snake to the king as if nothing had happened.

After dinner the king ordered George to saddle the horses and accompany him, as he wished to take a ride. The

king rode in front and George behind. As they were riding over a green meadow, George's horse bounded and began to neigh. 'Ho! ho! brother. I feel so light that I should like to jump over mountains!' 'As for that,' said the other, 'I should like to jump about, too, but there's an old man on my back; if I were to skip, he'd tumble on the ground like a sack and break his neck.' 'Let him break it—what matter?' said George's horse; 'instead of an old man you'll carry a young one.' George laughed heartily at this conversation, but so quietly that the king knew nothing about it. But the king also understood perfectly well what the horses were saying to each other, looked round, and seeing a smile on George's face, asked him what he was laughing at. Nothing, your illustrious majesty,' said George in excuse; 'only something occurred to my mind.' Nevertheless, the old king already suspected him, neither did he feel confidence in the horses, so he turned and rode back home.

When they arrived at the palace, the king ordered George to pour him out a glass of wine. 'But your head for it,' said he, 'if you don't pour it full, or if you pour it so that it runs over.' George took the decanter and poured. Just then in flew two birds through the window; one was chasing the other, and the one that was trying to get away carried three golden hairs in its beak. 'Give them to me said the first; 'they are mine.' 'I shan't; they're mine; I took them up.' 'But I saw them fall, when the golden-haired maiden was combing her hair. At any rate, give me two.' 'Not one!' Hereupon the other bird made a rush, and seized the golden hairs. As they struggled for them on the wing, one remained in each bird's beak, and the third golden hair fell on the ground, where it rang again. At this moment George looked round at it, and then poured the wine over. 'You've forfeited your life!' shouted the king; 'but I'll deal mercifully with you if you obtain the golden-haired maiden, and bring her me to wife.'

What was George to do? If he wanted to save his life, he must go in search of the maiden, though he did not know where to look for her. He saddled his horse, and rode at random. He came to a black forest, and there, under the forest by the roadside, a bush was burning; some cowherd had set it on fire. Under the bush was an ant-hill; sparks were falling on it, and the ants were fleeing in all directions with their little white eggs. 'Help, George, help!' cried they mournfully; 'we're being burnt to death, as well as our young ones in the eggs.' He got down from his horse at once, cut away the bush, and put out the fire. 'When you are in trouble think of us, and we'll help you.'

He rode on through the forest, and came to a lofty pine. On the top of this pine was a raven's nest, and below, on the ground, were two young ravens crying and complaining: 'Our father and mother have flown away; we've got to seek food for ourselves, and we poor little birds can't fly yet. Help us, George, help us! Feed us, or we

shall die of hunger!' George did not stop long to consider, but jumped down from his horse, and thrust his sword into its side, that the young ravens might have something to eat. 'When you are in need think of us, and we'll help you.'

After this, George had to go on on foot. He walked a long, long way through the forest, and when he at last got out of it, he saw before him a long and broad sea. On the shore of this sea two fishermen were quarrelling. They had caught a large golden fish in their net, and each wanted to have it for himself, 'The net is mine, and mine's the fish.' The other replied: 'Much good would your net have been, if it hadn't been for my boat and my help.' 'If we catch such another fish again, it will be yours.' 'Not so; wait you for the next, and give me this.' 'I'll set you at one,' said George. 'Sell me the fish—I'll pay you well for it—and you divide the money between you, share and share alike.'

He gave them all the money that the king had given him for his journey, leaving nothing at all for himself. The fishermen were delighted, and George let the fish go again into the sea. It splashed merrily through the water, dived, and then, not far from the shore, put out its head: 'When you want me, George, think of me, and I'll requite you.' It then disappeared. 'Where are you going?' the fishermen asked George. 'I'm going for the golden-haired maiden to be the bride of the old king, my lord, and I don't even know where to look for her.' 'We can tell you all about her,' said the fisher-men. 'It's Goldenhair, the king's daughter, of the Crystal Palace, on the island yonder. Every day at dawn she combs her golden hair, and the bright gleam therefrom goes over sky and over sea. If you wish it, we'll take you over to the island ourselves, as you set us at one again so nicely. But take care to bring away the right maiden; there are twelve maidens—the king's daughters—but only one has golden hair.'

When George was on the island, he went into the Crystal Palace to entreat the king to give the king, his lord, his golden-haired daughter to wife. 'I will,' said the king, 'but you must earn her; you must in three days perform three tasks, which I shall impose upon you, each day one. Meanwhile, you can rest till, to-morrow.' Next day, early, the king said to him: 'My Goldenhair had a necklace of costly pearls; the necklace broke, and the pearls were scattered in the long grass in the green meadow. You must collect all these pearls, without one being wanting.' George went into the meadow; it was long and broad; he knelt on the grass, and began to seek. He sought and sought from morn to noon, but never saw a pearl. 'Ah! if my ants were here, they might help me.' 'Here we are to help you,' said the ants, running in every direction, but always crowding round him. 'What do you want?' 'I have to collect pearls in this meadow, but I don't see one.' 'Only wait a bit, we'll collect them for

you.’ Before long they brought him a multitude of pearls out of the grass, and he had nothing to do but string them on the necklace. Afterwards, when he was going to fasten up the necklace, one more ant limped up—it was lame, its foot had been scorched when the fire was at the ant-hill—and cried out: ‘Stop, George, don’t fasten it up; I’m bringing you one more pearl.’

When George brought the pearls to the king, the king counted them over; not one was wanting. ‘You have done your business well,’ said he; ‘to-morrow I shall give you another piece of work.’ In the morning George came, and the king said to him: ‘My Goldenhair was bathing in the sea, and lost there a gold ring; you must find and bring it.’ George went to the sea, and walked sorrowfully along the shore. The sea was clear, but so deep that he couldn’t even see the bottom, much less could he seek and find the ring there. ‘Oh that my golden fish were here; it might be able to help me.’ Whereupon something glittered in the sea, and up swam the golden fish from the deep to the surface of the water: ‘Here I am to help you; what do you want?’ ‘I’ve got to find a gold ring in the sea, and I can’t even see the bottom.’ ‘I just met a pike which was carrying a gold ring in its mouth. Only wait a bit, I’ll bring it to you.’ Ere long it returned from the deep water, and brought him the pike, ring and all.

The king commended George for doing his business well, and then next morning laid upon him the third task: ‘If you wish me to give your king my Goldenhair to wife, you must bring her the waters of death and of life—she will require them.’ George did not know whither to betake himself for these waters, and went at haphazard hither and thither, whither his feet carried him, till he came to a black forest: ‘Ah, if my young ravens were here, perhaps they would help me.’ Now there was a rustling over his head, and two young ravens appeared above him: ‘Here we are to help you; what do you wish?’ ‘I’ve got to bring the waters of death and of life, and I don’t know where to look for them.’ ‘Oh, we know them well; only wait a bit, we’ll bring them to you.’

After a short time they each brought George a bottle-gourd full of water; in the one gourd was the water of life, in the other the water of death. George was delighted with his good fortune, and hastened to the castle. At the edge of the forest he saw a cobweb extending from one pine-tree to another; in the midst of the cobweb sat a large spider sucking a fly. George took the bottle with the water of death, sprinkled the spider, and the spider dropped to the ground like a ripe cherry—he was dead. He then sprinkled the fly with the water of life out of the other bottle, and the fly began to move, extricated itself from the cobweb, and off into the air. ‘Lucky for you, George, that you’ve brought me to life again,’ it buzzed round his ears; ‘without me you’d scarcely guess aright which of the twelve is Goldenhair.’

When the king saw that George had completed this matter also, he said he would give him his golden-haired

daughter. 'But,' said he, 'you must select her yourself.' He then led him into a great hall, in the midst of which was a round table, and round the table sat twelve beautiful maidens, one like the other; but each had on her head a long kerchief reaching down to the ground, white as snow, so that it couldn't be seen what manner of hair any of them had. 'Here are my daughters,' said the king; 'if you guess which of them is Goldenhair, you have won her, and can take her away at once; but if you don't guess right, she is not adjudged to you, you must depart without her.' George was in the greatest anxiety; he didn't know what to do. Whereupon something whispered into his ear: 'Buzz! buzz! go round the table, I'll tell you which is the one.' It was the fly that George had restored to life with the water of life. 'It isn't this maiden—nor this—nor this; this is Goldenhair!' 'Give me this one of your daughters,' cried George; 'I have earned her for my lord.' 'You have guessed right,' said the king; and the maiden at once rose from the table, threw off her kerchief, and her golden hair flowed in streams from her head to the ground, and such a brightness came from them, even as when the sun rises in the morning, that George's eyes were dazzled.

Then the king gave his daughter all that was fitting for her journey, and George took her away to be his lord's bride. The old king's eyes sparkled, and he jumped for joy, when he saw Goldenhair, and gave orders at once for preparations to be made for the wedding. 'I intended to have you hanged for your disobedience, that the ravens might devour you,' said he to George; 'but you have served me so well, that I shall only have your head cut off with an axe, and then I shall have you honourably buried.'

When George had been executed, Goldenhair begged the old king to grant her the body of his dead servant, and the king couldn't deny his golden-haired bride anything. She then fitted George's head to his body, and sprinkled him with the water of death, and the body and head grew together so that no mark of the wound remained. Then she sprinkled him with the water of life, and George rose up again, as if he had been born anew, as fresh as a stag, and youth beamed from his countenance.

'Oh, how heavily I have slept!' said George, and rubbed his eyes. 'Yes, indeed, you have slept heavily,' said Goldenhair; 'and if it hadn't been for me, you wouldn't have waked for ever and ever.' When the old king saw that George had come to life again, and that he was younger and handsomer than before, he wanted to be made young again also. He gave orders at once that his head should be cut off, and that he should be sprinkled with the water. They cut his head off and sprinkled him with the water of life, till they'd sprinkled it all away; but his head wouldn't grow on to the body. Then, and not till then, did they begin to sprinkle him with the water of death, and in an instant the head grew on to the body; but the king was dead all the same, because they had no more of the water of life to bring him to life again. And since the kingdom couldn't be without a

king, and they'd no one so intelligent as to understand all animals like George, they made George king and Goldenhair queen.

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