

Imperishable

Fairy Tales Of The Slav Peasants And Herdsmen

Slavic

Intermediate
39 min read

Once upon a time, ever so many years ago, there lived a little old man and a little old woman. Very old indeed were they, for they had lived nearly a hundred years. But they took neither joy nor pleasure in anything, and this because they had no children. They were now about to keep the seventy-fifth anniversary of their wedding day, known as the Diamond Wedding, but no guests were invited to share their simple feast.

As they sat side by side they went over in memory the years of their long life, and as they did so they felt sure that it was to punish them for their sins that God had denied them the sweet happiness of having children about them, and as they thought their tears fell fast. At that moment some one knocked.

“Who is there?” cried the old woman, and ran to open the door. There stood a little old man leaning on a stick, and white as a dove.

“What do you want?” asked the old woman.

“Charity,” answered he.

The good old woman was kind-hearted, and she cut her last loaf in two, giving one half to the beggar, who said, “I see you have been weeping, good wife, and I know the reason of your tears; but cheer up, by God’s grace you shall be comforted. Though poor and childless to-day, to-morrow you shall have family and fortune.”

When the old woman heard this she was overjoyed, and fetching her husband they both went to the door to

invite the old man in. But he was gone, and though they searched for him in every direction they found nothing but his stick lying on the ground. For it was not a poor old beggar, but an angel of God who had knocked. Our good friends did not know this, so they picked up the stick and hurried off to find the old man, with the purpose of returning it. But it seemed as if the stick, like its master, were endowed with some marvellous power, for whenever the old man or the old woman tried to pick it up it slipped out of their hands and rolled along the ground. Thus they followed it into a forest, and at the foot of a shrub which stood close by a stream it disappeared. They hunted all round the shrub thinking to find the stick there, but instead of the stick they came upon a bird's nest containing twelve eggs, and from the shape of the shells it seemed as if the young ones were ready to come forth.

“Pick up the eggs,” said the old man, “they will make us an omelette for our wedding feast.”

The old woman grumbled a little, but she took the nest and carried it home in the skirt of her gown. Fancy their astonishment when at the end of twelve hours there came out, not unfledged birdlings, but twelve pretty little boys. Then the shells broke into tiny fragments which were changed into as many gold pieces. Thus, as had been foretold, the old man and his wife found both family and fortune.

Now these twelve boys were most extraordinary children. Directly they came out of the shells they seemed to be at least three months old, such a noise did they make, crying and kicking about. The youngest of all was a very big baby with black eyes, red cheeks, and curly hair, and so lively and active that the old woman could hardly keep him in his cradle at all. In twelve hours' time the children seemed to be a year old, and could walk about and eat anything.

Then the old woman made up her mind that they should be baptized, and thereupon sent her husband to fetch priest and organist without delay; and the diamond wedding was celebrated at the same time as the christening. For a short time their joy was clouded over by the disappearance of the youngest boy, who was also the best-looking, and his parents' favourite. They had begun to weep and mourn for him as if he were lost, when suddenly he was seen to come from out of the sleeves of the priest's cassock, and was heard to speak these words: “Never fear, dear parents, your beloved son will not perish.”

The old woman kissed him fondly and handed him to his godfather, who presented him to the priest. So they had named him Niezguinek, that is, Imperishable. The twelve boys went on growing at the rate of six weeks every hour, and at the end of two years were fine strong young men. Niezguinek, especially, was of

extraordinary size and strength. The good old people lived happily and peacefully at home while their sons worked in the fields. On one occasion the latter went ploughing; and while the eleven eldest used the ordinary plough and team of oxen, Niezguinek made his own plough, and it had twelve ploughshares and twelve handles, and to it were harnessed twelve team of the strongest working oxen. The others laughed at him, but he did not mind, and turned up as much ground as his eleven brothers together.

Another time when they went haymaking and his brothers used the ordinary scythes, he carried one with twelve blades, and managed it so cleverly, in spite of the jests of his companions, that he cut as much grass as all of them together. And again, when they went to turn over the hay, Niezguinek used a rake with twelve teeth, and so cleared twelve plots of ground with every stroke. His haycock, too, was as large as a hill in comparison with those of his brothers. Now, the day after the making of the haycocks the old man and his wife happened to be in the fields, and they noticed that one haycock had disappeared; so thinking wild horses had made off with it, they advised their sons to take turns in watching the place.

The eldest took his turn first, but after having watched all night fell asleep towards morning, when he awoke to find another haycock missing. The second son was not more fortunate in preventing the disappearance of the hay, while the others succeeded no better; in fact, of all the twelve haycocks, there only remained the largest, Niezguinek's, and even that had been meddled with.

When it was the youngest's turn to watch, he went to the village blacksmith and got him to make an iron club weighing two hundred and sixty pounds; so heavy was it that the blacksmith and his assistants could hardly turn it on the anvil. In order to test it, Niezguinek whirled it round his head and threw it up in the air, and when it had nearly reached the ground he caught it on his knee, upon which it was smashed to atoms. He then ordered another weighing four hundred and eighty pounds, and this the blacksmith and his men could not even move. Niezguinek had helped them to make it, and when finished he tested it in the same manner as the first. Finding it did not break he kept it, and had in addition a noose plaited with twelve strong ropes. Towards nightfall he went to the field, crouched down behind his haycock, crossed himself, and waited to see what would happen. At midnight there was a tremendous noise which seemed to come from the east, while in that direction appeared a bright light. Then a white mare, with twelve colts as white as herself, trotted up to the haycock and began to eat it. Niezguinek came out of his hiding-place, and throwing the noose over the mare's neck, jumped on her back and struck her with his heavy club. The terrified creature gave the signal to the colts to escape, but she herself, hindered by the noose, out of breath, and wounded by the club, could not follow, but

sank down on the earth saying, "Do not choke me, Niezguinek."

He marvelled to hear her speak human language, and loosened the noose. When she had taken breath she said, "Knight, if you give me my liberty you shall never repent it. My husband, the Dappled Horse with Golden Mane, will cruelly revenge himself upon you when he knows I am your prisoner; his strength and swiftness are so great you could not escape him. In exchange for my freedom I will give you my twelve colts, who will serve you and your brothers faithfully."

On hearing their mother neigh the colts returned and stood with bent heads before the young man, who released the mare, and led them home. The brothers were delighted to see Niezguinek return with twelve beautiful white horses, and each took the one that pleased his fancy most, while the thinnest and weakest-looking was left for the youngest.

The old couple were happy in the thought that their son was brave as well as strong. One day it occurred to the old woman that she would like to see them all married, and to have the house merry with her daughters-in-law and their children. So she called upon her gossips and friends to talk the matter over, and finally persuaded her husband to be of the same opinion. He called his sons around him and addressed them thus: "Listen to me, my sons: in a certain country lives a celebrated witch known as old Yaga. She is lame, and travels about in an oaken trough. She supports herself on iron crutches, and when she goes abroad carefully removes all traces of her steps with a broom. This old witch has twelve beautiful daughters who have large dowries; do your best to win them for your wives. Do not return without bringing them with you."

Both parents blessed their sons, who, mounting their horses, were soon out of sight. All but Niezguinek, who, left alone, went to the stable and began to shed tears.

"Why do you weep?" asked his horse.

"Don't you think I have good reason?" replied he. "Here I have to go a long long way in search of a wife, and you, my friend, are so thin and weak that were I to depend upon your strength I should never be able to join my brothers."

"Do not despair, Niezguinek," said the horse, "not only will you overtake your brothers, but you will leave them far behind. I am the son of the Dappled Horse with the Golden Mane, and if you will do exactly as I tell you I shall be given the same power as he. You must kill me and bury me under a layer of earth and manure, then

sow some wheat over me, and when the corn is ripe it must be gathered and some of it placed near my body.”

Niezguinek threw his arms round his horse’s neck and kissed him fondly, then led him into a yard and killed him with one blow of his club. The horse staggered a moment and then fell dead. His master covered him with a layer of manure and earth, upon which he sowed wheat, as had been directed. It was immediately watered by a gentle rain, and warmed by the heat of the sun’s rays. The corn took root and ripened so quickly that on the twelfth day Niezguinek set to work to cut, thresh, and winnow it. So abundant was it that he was able to give eleven measures to his parents, and keeping one for himself, spread it before his horse’s bones. In a very short time the horse moved his head, sniffed the air, and began to devour the wheat. As soon as it was finished he sprang up, and was so full of life that he wanted to jump over the fence in one bound: but Niezguinek held him by the mane, and getting lightly on his back, said: “Halt there, my spirited steed, I do not want others to have the benefit of all the trouble I have had with you. Carry me to old Yaga’s house.”

He was of a truth a most magnificent horse, big and strong, with eyes that flashed like lightning. He leapt up into the air as high as the clouds, and the next moment descended in the middle of a field, saying to his master: “As we have first to see old Yaga, from whom we are still a great way off, we can stop here for a short time: take food and rest, I will do the same. Your brothers will be obliged to pass us, for we are a good way in front of them. When they come you can go on together to visit the old witch: remember, though it is difficult to get into her house, it is much more difficult still to get out. But if you would be perfectly safe, take from under my saddle a brush, a scarf, and a handkerchief. They will be of use in helping you to escape; for when you unroll the scarf, a river will flow between you and your enemy; if you shake the brush it will become a thick forest; and by waving the handkerchief it will be changed into a lake. After you have been received into Yaga’s house, and your brothers have stabled their horses and gone to bed, I will tell you how to act.”

For twelve days Niezguinek and his horse rested and gained strength, and at the end of the time the eleven brothers came up. They wondered greatly to see the youngest, and said, “Where on earth did you come from? And whose horse is that?”

“I have come from home. The horse is the same I chose at first. We have been waiting here twelve days; let us go on together now.”

Within a short time they came to a house surrounded by a high oaken paling, at the gate of which they knocked. Old Yaga peeped out through a chink in the fence and cried, "Who are you? What do you want?"

"We are twelve brothers come to ask the twelve daughters of Yaga in marriage. If she is willing to be our mother-in-law, let her open the door."

The door was opened and Yaga appeared. She was a frightful-looking creature, old as the hills; and being one of those monsters who feed on human flesh, the unfortunate wretches who once entered her house never came out again. She had a lame leg, and because of this she leaned on a great iron crutch, and when she went out removed all traces of her steps with a broom.

She received the young travellers very graciously, shut the gate of the courtyard behind them, and led them into the house. Niezguinek's brothers dismounted, and taking their horses to the stables, tied them up to rings made of silver; the youngest fastened his to a copper ring. The old witch served her guests with a good supper, and gave them wine and hydromel to drink. Then she made up twelve beds on the right side of the room for the travellers, and on the left side twelve beds for her daughters.

All were soon asleep except Niezguinek. He had been warned beforehand by his horse of the danger that threatened them, and now he got up quietly and changed the positions of the twenty-four beds, so that the brothers lay to the left side of the room, and Yaga's daughters to the right. At midnight, old Yaga cried out in a hoarse voice, "Guzla, play. Sword, strike."

Then were heard strains of sweet music, to which the old woman beat time from her oaken trough. At the same moment a slender sword descended into the room, and passing over to the beds on the right, cut off the heads of the girls one by one: after which it danced about and flashed in the darkness.

When the dawn broke the guzla ceased playing, the sword disappeared, and silence reigned. Then Niezguinek softly aroused his brothers, and they all went out without making any noise. Each mounted his horse, and when they had broken open the yard gate they made their escape at full speed. Old Yaga, thinking she heard footsteps, got up and ran into the room where her daughters lay dead. At the dreadful sight she gnashed her teeth, barked like a dog, tore out her hair by handfuls, and seating herself in her trough as in a car, set off after the fugitives. She had nearly reached them, and was already stretching out her hand to seize them, when Niezguinek unrolled his magic scarf, and instantly a deep river flowed between her and the horsemen. Not

being able to cross it she stopped on the banks, and howling savagely began to drink it up.

“Before you have swallowed all that river you will burst, you wicked old witch,” cried Niezguinek. Then he rejoined his brothers.

But the old woman drank all the water, crossed the bed of the river in her trough, and soon came near the young people. Niezguinek shook his handkerchief, and a lake immediately spread out between them. So she was again obliged to stop, and shrieking with rage began to drink up the water.

“Before you have drunk that lake dry you will have burst yourself,” said Niezguinek, and rode after his brothers.

The old vixen drank up part of the water, and turning the remainder into a thick fog, hastened along in her trough. She was once more close upon the young men when Niezguinek, without a moment’s delay, seized his brush, and as he waved it in the air a thick forest rose between them. For a time the witch was at a loss to know what to do. On one side she saw Niezguinek and his brothers rapidly disappearing, while she stood on the other hindered by the branches and torn by the thorns of the thick bushes, unable either to advance or retreat. Foaming with rage, with fire flashing from her eyes, she struck right and left with her crutches, crashing trees on all sides, but before she could clear a way those she was in pursuit of had got more than a hundred miles ahead.

So she was forced to give up, and grinding her teeth, howling, and tearing out her hair, she threw after the fugitives such flaming glances from her eyes that she set the forest on fire, and taking the road home was soon lost to sight.

The travellers, seeing the flames, guessed what had happened, and thanked God for having preserved them from such great dangers. They continued their journey, and by eventide arrived at the top of a steep hill. There they saw a town besieged by foreign troops, who had already destroyed the outer part, and only awaited daylight to take it by storm.

The twelve brothers kept out of sight behind the enemy; and when they had rested and turned out their horses to graze all went to sleep except Niezguinek, who kept watch without closing an eye. When everything was perfectly still he got up, and calling his horse, said, "Listen; yonder in that tent sleeps the king of this besieging army, and he dreams of the victory he hopes for on the morrow: how could we send all the soldiers to sleep and get possession of his person?"

The horse replied, "You will find some dried leaves of the herb of Sleep in the pocket of the saddle. Mount upon my back and hover round the camp, spreading fragments of the plant. That will cause all the soldiers to fall into a sound sleep, after which you can carry out your plans."

Niezguinek mounted his horse, pronouncing these magic words:

"Marvel of strength and of beauty so white,

Horse of my heart, let us go;

Rise in the air, like a bird take thy flight,

Haste to the camp of the foe."

The horse glanced upwards as if he saw some one beckoning to him from the clouds, then rose rapidly as a bird on the wing and hovered over the camp. Niezguinek took handfuls of the herb of Sleep from the saddle-pockets and sprinkled it all about. Upon which all in the camp, including the sentinels, fell at once into a heavy sleep. Niezguinek alighted, entered the tent, and carried off the sleeping king without any difficulty. He then returned to his brothers, unharnessed his horse and lay down to rest, placing the royal prisoner near him. His majesty slept on as if nothing unusual had taken place.

At daybreak the soldiers of the besieging army awoke, and not being able to find their king, were seized with such a panic of terror that they retreated in great disorder. The ruler of the besieged city would not at first believe that the enemy had really disappeared, and indeed went himself to see if it was true: of a truth there remained nothing of the enemy's camp but a few deserted tents whitening on the plain. At that moment Niezguinek came up with his brothers, and said, "Sire, the enemy has fled, and we were unable to detain them, but here is their king whom we have made prisoner, and whom I deliver up to you."

The ruler replied, "I see, indeed, that you are a brave man among brave men, and I will reward you. This royal

prisoner is worth a large ransom to me; so speak,—what would you like me to do for you?”

“I should wish, sire, that my brothers and I might enter the service of your majesty.”

“I am quite willing,” answered the king. Then, having placed his prisoner in charge of his guards, he made Niezguinek general, and placed him at the head of a division of his army; the eleven brothers were given the rank of officers.

When Niezguinek appeared in uniform, and with sabre in hand mounted his splendid charger, he looked so handsome and conducted the manœuvres so well that he surpassed all the other chiefs in the country, thus causing much jealousy, even among his own brothers, for they were vexed that the youngest should outshine them, and so determined to ruin him.

In order to accomplish this they imitated his handwriting, and placed such a note before the king’s door while Niezguinek was engaged elsewhere. When the king went out he found the letter, and calling Niezguinek to him, said, “I should very much like to have the phonic guzla you mention in your letter.”

“But, sire, I have not written anything about a guzla,” said he.

“Read the note then. Is it not in your handwriting?”

Niezguinek read:

“In a certain country, within the house of old Yaga, is a marvellous guzla: if the king wish I will fetch it for him.

“(Signed) Niezguinek.”

“It is true,” said he, “that this writing resembles mine, but it is a forgery, for I never wrote it.”

“Never mind,” said the king, “as you were able to take my enemy prisoner you will certainly be able to succeed in getting old Yaga’s guzla: go then, and do not return without it, or you will be executed.”

Niezguinek bowed and went out. He went straight to the stable, where he found his charger looking very sad and thin, his head drooping before the trough, the hay untouched.

“What is the matter with you, my good steed? What grieves you?”

“I grieve for us both, for I foresee a long and perilous journey.”

“You are right, old fellow, but we have to go. And what is more, we have to take away and bring here old Yaga’s guzla; and how shall we do it, seeing that she knows us?”

“We shall certainly succeed if you do as I tell you.”

Then the horse gave him certain instructions, and when Niezguinek had led him out of the stable and mounted he said:

“Marvel of strength and of beauty so white,

Horse of my heart, do not wait on the road;

Rise in the air, like a bird take thy flight,

Haste to the wicked old Yaga’s abode.”

The horse arose in the air as if he heard some one calling to him from the clouds, and flitting rapidly along passed over several kingdoms within a few hours, thus reaching old Yaga’s dwelling before midnight.

Niezguinek threw the leaves of Sleep in at the window, and by means of another wonderful herb caused all the doors of the house to open. On entering he found old Yaga fast asleep, with her trough and iron crutches beside her, while above her head hung the magic sword and guzla.

While the old witch lay snoring with all her might, Niezguinek took the guzla and leapt on his horse, crying:

“Marvel of strength and of beauty so white,

Horse of my heart, while I sing,

Rise in the air, like a bird take thy flight,

Haste to the court of my king.”

Just as if the horse had seen something in the clouds, he rose swift as an arrow, and flew through the air, above the fogs. The same day about noon he neighed before his own manger in the royal stable, and Niezguinek went in to the king and presented him with the guzla. On pronouncing the two words, “Guzla, play,” strains of

music so gay and inspiring were heard that all the courtiers began dancing with one another. The sick who listened were cured of their diseases, those who were in trouble and grief forgot their sorrows, and all living creatures were thrilled with a gladness such as they had never felt before. The king was beside himself with joy; he loaded Niezguinek with honours and presents, and, in order to have him always at court, raised him to a higher rank in the army. In this new post he had many under him, and he showed much exactitude in drill and other matters, punishing somewhat severely when necessary. He made, too, no difference in the treatment of his brothers, which angered them greatly, and caused them to be still more jealous and to plot against him. So they again imitated his handwriting and composed another letter, which they left at the king's door. When his majesty had read it he called Niezguinek to him and said, "I should much like to have the marvellous sword you speak of in your letter."

"Sire, I have not written anything about a sword," said Niezguinek.

"Well, read it for yourself." And he read:

"In a certain country within the house of old Yaga is a sword that strikes of its own accord: if the king would like to have it, I will engage to bring it him.

"(Signed) Niezguinek."

"Certainly," said Niezguinek, "this writing resembles mine, but I never wrote those words."

"Never mind, as you succeeded in bringing me the guzla you will find no difficulty in obtaining the sword. Start without delay, and do not return without it at your peril."

Niezguinek bowed and went to the stable, where he found his horse looking very thin and miserable, with his head drooping.

"What is the matter, my horse? Do you want anything?"

"I am unhappy because I foresee a long and dangerous journey."

"You are right, for we are ordered to return to Yaga's house for the sword: but how can we get hold of it? doubtless she guards it as the apple of her eye."

The horse answered, "Do as I tell you and all will be right." And he gave him certain instructions. Niezguinek

came out of the stable, saddled his friend, and mounting him said:

“Marvel of strength and of beauty so white;

Horse of my heart, do not wait on the road;

Rise in the air, like a bird take thy flight,

Haste to the wicked old witch’s abode.”

The horse rose immediately as if he had been beckoned to by some one in the clouds, and passing swiftly through the air, crossed rivers and mountains, till at midnight he stopped before old Yaga’s house.

Since the disappearance of the guzla the sword had been placed on guard before the house, and whoever came near it was cut to pieces.

Niezguinek traced a circle with holy chalk, and placing himself on horseback in the centre of it, said:

“Sword who of thyself can smite,

I come to brave thy ire;

Peace or war upon this site

Of thee I do require.

If thou canst conquer, thine my life;

Should I beat thee, then ends this strife.”

The sword clinked, leapt into the air, and fell to the ground divided into a thousand other swords, which ranged themselves in battle array and began to attack Niezguinek. But in vain; they were powerless to touch him; for on reaching the chalk-traced circle they broke like wisps of straw. Then the sword-in-chief, seeing how useless it was to go on trying to wound him, submitted itself to Niezguinek and promised him obedience. Taking the magic weapon in his hand, he mounted his horse and said:

“Marvel of strength and of beauty so white,

Horse of my heart, while I sing,

Rise in the air, like a bird take thy flight,

Back to the court of my king.”

The horse started with renewed courage, and by noon was eating his hay in the royal stables. Niezguinek went in to the king and presented him with the sword. While he was rejoicing over it one of his servants rushed in quite out of breath and said, “Sire, your enemies who attacked us last year, and whose king is your prisoner, surround our town. Being unable to redeem their sovereign, they have come with an immense army, and threaten to destroy us if their king is not released without ransom.”

The king armed himself with the magic sword, and going outside the city walls, said to it, as he pointed to the enemy’s camp, “Magic Sword, smite the foe.”

Immediately the sword clinked, leapt flashing in the air, and fell in a thousand blades that threw themselves on the camp. One regiment was destroyed during the first attack, another was defeated in the same way, while the rest of the terrified soldiers fled and completely disappeared. Then the king said, “Sword, return to me.”

The thousand swords again became one, and so it returned to its master’s hand.

The victorious king came home filled with joy. He called Niezguinek to him, loaded him with gifts, and assuring him of his favour, made him the highest general of his forces. In carrying out the duties of this new post Niezguinek was often obliged to punish his brothers, who became more and more enraged against him, and took counsel together how they might bring about his downfall.

One day the king found a letter by his door, and after reading it he called Niezguinek to him and said, “I should very much like to see Princess Sudolisu, whom you wish to bring me.”

“Sire, I do not know the lady, and have never spoken to her.”

“Here, look at your letter.”

Niezguinek read:

“Beyond the nine kingdoms, far beyond the ocean, within a silver vessel with golden masts lives Princess

Sudolisu. If the king wishes it, I will seek her for him.

(Signed) Niezguinek.”

“It is true the writing is like unto mine; nevertheless, I neither composed the letter nor wrote it.”

“No matter,” answered the king. “You will be able to get this princess, as you did the guzla and the sword: if not, I will have you killed.”

Niezguinek bowed and went out. He entered the stable where stood his horse looking very weak and sad, with his head bent down.

“What is the matter, dear horse? Are you in want of anything?”

“I am sorrowful,” answered the horse, “because I foresee a long and difficult journey.”

“You are right, for we have to go beyond the nine kingdoms, and far beyond the ocean, to find Princess Sudolisu. Can you tell me what to do?”

“I will do my best, and if it is God’s will we shall succeed. Bring your club of four hundred and eighty pounds weight, and let us be off.”

Niezguinek saddled his horse, took his club, and mounting said:

“Marvel of strength and of beauty so white,

Horse of my heart, do not lag on the road;

Rise in the air, through the clouds take thy flight,

Haste to Princess Sudolisu’s abode.”

Then the horse looked up as if there were something he wanted in the clouds, and with a spring flew through the air, swift as an arrow; and so by the second day they had passed over ten kingdoms, and finding themselves beyond the ocean, halted on the shore. Here the horse said to Niezguinek, “Do you see that silver ship with golden masts that rides on the waves yonder? That beautiful vessel is the home of Princess Sudolisu, youngest daughter of old Yaga. For after the witch had lost the guzla and magic sword she feared to lose her daughter too: so she shut her up in that vessel, and having thrown the key thereof into the ocean, sat herself in her oaken

trough, where with the help of the iron crutches she rows round and round the silver ship, warding off tempests, and keeping at a distance all other ships that would approach it.

“The first thing to be done is to get the diamond key that opens the ship. In order to procure this you must kill me, and then throw into the water one end of my entrails, by which bait you will trap the King of the Lobsters. Do not set him free until he has promised to get you the key, for it is this key that draws the vessel to you of its own accord.”

“Ah, my beloved steed,” cried Niezguinek, “how can I kill you when I love you as my own brother, and when my fate depends upon you entirely?”

“Do as I tell you; you can bring me to life again, as you did before.”

Niezguinek caressed his horse, kissed him and wept over him; then, raising his mighty club, struck him full on the forehead. The poor creature staggered and fell down dead. Niezguinek cut him open, and putting an end of his entrails in the water, he kept hold of it and hid himself in the water-rushes. Soon there came a crowd of crawfish, and amongst them a gigantic lobster as large as a year-old calf. Niezguinek seized him and threw him on the beach. The lobster said, “I am king of all the crawfish tribe. Let me go, and I will give you great riches for my ransom.”

“I do not want your riches,” answered Niezguinek, “but in exchange for your freedom give me the diamond key which belongs to the silver ship with the golden masts, for in that vessel dwells Princess Sudolisu.”

The King of the Crawfish whistled, upon which myriads of his subjects appeared. He spoke to them in their own language, and dismissed one, who soon returned with the magic diamond key in his claws.

Niezguinek loosed the King of the Crawfish; and hiding himself inside his horse’s body as he had been instructed, lay in wait. At that moment an old raven, followed by all his nestlings, happened to pass, and attracted by the horse’s carcass, he called to his young ones to come and feast with him. Niezguinek seized the smallest of the birds and held it firmly.

“Let my birdling go,” said the old raven, “I will give you in return anything you like to ask.”

“Fetch me then three kinds of water, the Life-giving, the Curing, and the Strengthening.”

The old raven started off, and while awaiting his return Niezguinek, who still held the ravenling, questioned

him as to where he had come from and what he had seen on his travels, and in this way heard news of his brothers.

When the father bird returned, carrying with him the bottles filled with the marvellous waters, he wanted to have his nestling back.

“One moment more,” said Niezguinek, “I want to be sure that they are of the right sort.”

Then he replaced the entrails in the body of his horse and sprinkled him first with the Life-giving, then with the Curing, and finally with the Strengthening Water; after which his beloved steed leapt to his feet full of strength and cried, “Ah! how very soundly I have slept.”

Niezguinek released the young raven and said to his horse, “For sure, you would have slept to all eternity, and have never seen the sun again, if I had not revived you as you taught me.”

While speaking he saw the marvellous ship sparkling white in the sun. She was made entirely of pure silver, with golden masts. The rigging was of silk, the sails of velvet, and the whole was enclosed in a casing of impenetrable steel network. Niezguinek sprang down to the water's edge armed with his club, and rubbing his forehead with the diamond key, said:

“Riding on the ocean waves a magic ship I see;

Stop and change thy course, O ship, here I hold the key.

Obey the signal known to thee,

And come at once direct to me.”

The vessel turned right round and came at full speed towards land, and right on to the bank, where it remained motionless.

Niezguinek smashed in the steel network with his club; and opening the doors with the diamond key, there found Princess Sudolisu. He made her unconscious with the herb Sleep, and lifting her before him on his horse, said:

“Marvel of strength and of beauty so white,

Horse of my heart, while I sing,

Swift as an arrow through space take thy flight

Straight to the court of my king.”

Then the horse, as if he saw some strange thing in the clouds, lifted himself in the air and began to fly through space so rapidly that in about two hours he had crossed rivers, mountains, and forests, and had reached his journey’s end.

Although Niezguinek had fallen violently in love with the princess himself, he took her straight to the royal palace and introduced her to the king.

Now she was so exquisitely beautiful that the monarch was quite dazzled by looking at her, and being thus carried away by his admiration, he put his arm round her as if to caress her: but she rebuked him severely.

“What have I done to offend you, princess? Why do you treat me so harshly?”

“Because in spite of your rank you are ill-bred. You neither ask my name nor that of my parents, and you think to take possession of me as if I were but a dog or a falcon. You must understand that he who would be my husband must have triple youth, that of heart, soul, and body.”

“Charming princess, if I could become young again we would be married directly.”

She replied, “But I have the means of making you so, and by help of this sword in my hand. For with it I will pierce you to the heart, then cut up your body into small pieces, wash them carefully, and join them together again. And if I breathe upon them you will return to life young and handsome, just as if you were only twenty years of age.”

“Oh indeed! I should like to know who would submit to that; first make trial of Sir Niezguinek here.”

The princess looked at him, whereupon he bowed and said, “Lovely princess, I willingly submit, although I am young enough without it. In any case life without you would be valueless.”

Then the princess took a step towards him and killed him with her sword. She cut him up in pieces and washed these in pure water, after which she joined them together again and breathed upon them. Instantly Niezguinek

sprang up full of life and health, and looked so handsome and bright that the old king, who was dreadfully jealous, exclaimed, "Make me, too, young again, princess; do not lose a moment."

The princess pierced him to the heart with her sword, cut him up into little pieces, and, opening the window, threw them out, at the same time calling the king's dogs, who quickly ate them up. Then she turned to Niezguinek and said, "Proclaim yourself king, and I will be your queen."

He followed her advice, and within a short time they were married; his brothers, whom he had pardoned, and his parents having been invited to the wedding. On their way back from the church the magic sword suddenly clinked, and, flashing in the air, divided itself into a thousand swords that placed themselves on guard as sentinels all round the palace. The guzla, too, began to play so sweetly and gaily that every living thing began to dance for joy.

The festival was magnificent. I myself was there, and drank freely of wine and mead; and although not a drop went into my mouth, my chin was quite wet.

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