

Kovlad - 1. The Sovereign of the Mineral Kingdom

Fairy Tales Of The Slav Peasants And Herdsmen

Slavic

*Intermediate
9 min read*

Once upon a time, and a long long time ago it was, there lived a widow who had a very pretty daughter. The mother, good honest woman, was quite content with her station in life. But with the daughter it was otherwise; she, like a spoilt beauty, looked contemptuously upon her many admirers, her mind was full of proud and ambitious thoughts, and the more lovers she had, the prouder she became.

One beautiful moonlight night the mother awoke, and being unable to sleep, began to pray God for the happiness of her only child, though she often made her mother's life miserable. The fond woman looked lovingly at the beautiful daughter sleeping by her side, and she wondered, as she saw her smile, what happy dream had visited her. Then she finished her prayer, and laying her head on the girl's pillow, fell asleep. Next day she said, "Come, darling child, tell me what you were dreaming about last night, you looked so happy smiling in your sleep."

"Oh yes, mother, I remember. I had a very beautiful dream. I thought a rich nobleman came to our house, in a splendid carriage of brass, and gave me a ring set with stones, that sparkled like the stars of heaven. When I entered the church with him, it was full of people, and they all thought me divine and adorable, like the Blessed Virgin."

“Ah! my child, what sin! May God keep you from such dreams.”

But the daughter ran away singing, and busied herself about the house. The same day a handsome young farmer drove into the village in his cart and begged them to come and share his country bread. He was a kind fellow, and the mother liked him much. But the daughter refused his invitation, and insulted him into the bargain.

“Even if you had driven in a carriage of brass,” she said, “and had offered me a ring set with stones shining as the stars in heaven, I would never have married you—you, a mere peasant!”

The young farmer was terribly upset at her words, and with a prayer for her soul, returned home a saddened man. But her mother scolded and reproached her.

The next night the woman again awoke, and taking her rosary prayed with still greater fervour, that God would bless her child. This time the girl laughed as she slept.

“What can the poor child be dreaming about?” she said to herself: and sighing she prayed for her again. Then she laid her head upon her pillow and tried in vain to sleep. In the morning, when her daughter was dressing, she said: “Well, my dear, you were dreaming again last night, and laughing like a maniac.”

“Was I? Listen, I dreamt a nobleman came for me in a silver carriage, and gave me a golden diadem. When I entered the church with him, the people admired and worshipped me more than the Blessed Virgin.”

“Ay me, what a terrible dream! what a wicked dream! Pray God not to lead you into temptation.”

Then she scolded her daughter severely and went out, slamming the door after her. That same day a carriage drove into the village, and some gentlemen invited mother and daughter to share the bread of the lord of the manor. The mother considered such an offer a great honour, but the daughter refused it and replied to the gentlemen scornfully: “Even if you had come to fetch me in a carriage of solid silver and had presented me with a golden diadem, I would never have consented to be the wife of your lord.”

The gentlemen turned away in disgust and returned home; the mother rebuked her severely for so much pride.

“Miserable, foolish girl!” she cried, “pride is a breath from hell. It is your duty to be humble, honest, and sweet-

tempered.”

The daughter replied by a laugh.

The third night she slept soundly, but the poor woman at her side could not close her eyes. Tormented with dark forebodings, she feared some misfortune was about to happen, and counted her beads, praying fervently. All at once the young sleeper began to sneer and laugh.

“Merciful God! ah me!” cried the poor woman, “what are these dreams that worry her poor brain!”

In the morning she said, “What made you sneer so frightfully last night? You must have had bad dreams again, my poor child.”

“Now, mother, you look as if you were going to preach again.”

“No, no; but I want to know what you were dreaming about.”

“Well, I dreamt some one drove up in a golden carriage and asked me to marry him, and he brought me a mantle of cloth of pure gold. When we came into church, the crowd pressed forward to kneel before me.”

The mother wrung her hands piteously, and the girl left the room to avoid hearing her lamentations. That same day three carriages entered the yard, one of brass, one of silver, and one of gold. The first was drawn by two, the second by three, the third by four magnificent horses. Gentlemen wearing scarlet gloves and green mantles got out of the brass and silver carriages, while from the golden carriage alighted a prince who, as the sun shone on him, looked as if he were dressed in gold. They all made their way to the widow and asked for her daughter’s hand.

“I fear we are not worthy of so much honour,” replied the widow meekly, but when the daughter’s eyes fell upon her suitor she recognised in him the lover of her dreams, and withdrew to weave an aigrette of many-coloured feathers. In exchange for this aigrette which she offered her bridegroom, he placed upon her finger a ring set with stones that shone like the stars in heaven, and over her shoulders a mantle of cloth of gold. The young bride, beside herself with joy, retired to complete her toilette. Meanwhile the anxious mother, a prey to the blackest forebodings, said to her son-in-law, “My daughter has consented to share your bread, tell me of what sort of flour it is made?”

“In our house we have bread of brass, of silver, and of gold; my wife will be free to choose.”

Such a reply astonished her more than ever, and made her still more unhappy. The daughter asked no questions, was in fact content to know nothing, not even what her mother suffered. She looked magnificent in her bridal attire and golden mantle, but she left her home with the prince without saying good-bye either to her mother or to her youthful companions. Neither did she ask her mother’s blessing, though the latter wept and prayed for her safety.

After the marriage ceremony they mounted the golden carriage and set off, followed by the attendants of silver and brass. The procession moved slowly along the road without stopping until it reached the foot of a high rock. Here, instead of a carriage entrance, was a large cavern which led out into a steep slope down which the horses went lower and lower. The giant Zémo-tras (he who makes the earthquakes) closed the opening with a huge stone. They made their way in darkness for some time, the terrified bride being reassured by her husband.

“Fear nothing,” said he, “in a little while it will be clear and beautiful.”

Grotesque dwarfs, carrying lighted torches, appeared on all sides, saluted and welcomed their King Kovlad as they illumined the road for him and his attendants. Then for the first time the girl knew she had married Kovlad, but this mattered little to her. On coming out from these gloomy passages into the open they found themselves surrounded by large forests and mountains, mountains that seemed to touch the sky. And, strange to relate, all the trees of whatsoever kind, and even the mountains that seemed to touch the sky, were of solid lead. When they had crossed these marvellous mountains the giant Zémo-tras closed all the openings in the

road they had passed. They then drove out upon vast and beautiful plains, in the centre of which was a golden palace covered with precious stones. The bride was weary with looking at so many wonders, and gladly sat down to the feast prepared by the dwarfs. Meats of many kinds were served, roast and boiled, but lo! they were of metal—brass, silver, and gold. Every one ate heartily and enjoyed the food, but the young wife, with tears in her eyes, begged for a piece of bread.

“Certainly, madam, with pleasure,” answered Kovlad. But she could not eat the bread which was brought, for it was of brass. Then the king sent for a piece of silver bread, still she could not eat it; and again for a slice of golden bread, that too she was unable to bite. The servants did all they could to get something to their mistress’s taste, but she found it impossible to eat anything.

“I should be most happy to gratify you,” said Kovlad “but we have no other kind of food.”

Then she realised for the first time in whose power she had placed herself, and she began to weep bitterly and wish she had taken her mother’s advice.

“It is of no use to weep and regret,” said Kovlad, “you must have known the kind of bread you would have to break here; your wish has been fulfilled.”

And so it was, for nothing can recall the past. The wretched girl was obliged henceforth to live underground with her husband Kovlad, the God of Metals, in his golden palace. And this because she had set her heart upon nothing but the possession of gold, and had never wished for anything better.

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