



Ohnivak

Fairy Tales Of The Slav Peasants And Herdsmen

Slavic

Advanced
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A certain king had a beautiful garden which contained a number of very rare trees, but the most rare of all was an apple tree. It stood in the middle of the garden, and produced one golden apple every day. In the morning the blossom unfolded, during the day you might watch the fruit grow, and before nightfall the apple was fully ripe. The next day the same thing occurred—indeed, it happened regularly every twenty-four hours.

Nevertheless, no ripe fruit ever remained on the tree on the following day; the apple disappeared, no one knew how or when, and this deeply grieved the king.

At last he could bear it no longer, and calling his eldest son to him, said: “My child, I wish you to keep watch in the garden to-night, and see if you can find out what becomes of my golden apples. I will reward you with the choice of all my treasures; if you should be lucky enough to get hold of the thief, and bring him to me, I would gladly give you half my kingdom.”

The young prince girded his trusty sword to his side, and with his crossbow on his shoulder and a good stock of well-tempered arrows, went into the garden to mount guard. And as he sat under the apple tree a great drowsiness came over him which he could not resist; his arms dropped, his eyes closed, and stretching himself on the grass he slept as soundly as if he had been in his own bed at home, nor did he awake until day dawn, and then he saw that the apple had disappeared.

When questioned by his father, he said that no thieves had come, but that the apple had vanished all the same. The king shook his head, for he did not believe a word of it. Then, turning to his second son, he bade him keep watch, and promised him a handsome reward if he should catch the thief.

So the second son armed himself with everything necessary and went into the garden. But he succeeded no better than his brother, for he could not resist the desire to sleep, and when he awoke the apple was no longer there.

When his father asked him how it disappeared, he replied, "No one took it, it vanished of itself."

"Now, my dearest one, take your turn," said the king to his youngest son; "although you are young, and have less experience than your brothers, let us see if you cannot succeed where they have failed. If you are willing, go, and may God help you."

Towards evening, when it began to be dusk, the youngest son went into the garden to keep watch. He took with him a sword and crossbow, a few well-tempered arrows, and a hedgehog's skin as a sort of apron, for he thought that while sitting under the tree, if he spread the skin over his knees, the pricking of the bristles on his hands might keep him awake. And so it did, for by this means he was able to resist the drowsiness that came over him.

At midnight Ohnivak, the bird of fire, flew down and alighted upon the tree, and was just going off with the apple when the prince fixed an arrow to his bow, and letting it fly, struck the bird under the wing. Although wounded, it flew away, dropping one of its feathers upon the ground. That night for the first time the apple remained untouched upon the tree.

“Have you caught the thief?” asked the king next day.

“Not altogether, but no doubt we shall have him in time. I have a bit of his trappings.” And he gave the king the feather, and told him all that had taken place.

The king was charmed with the feather; so lovely and bright was it that it illumined all the galleries of the palace, and they needed no other light.

The courtiers told the king that the feather could only belong to Ohnivak, the bird of fire, and that it was worth all the rest of the royal treasures put together.

From that time Ohnivak came no more to the garden, and the apples remained untouched. Yet the king could think of nothing else but how to possess this marvellous bird. At last, beginning to despair of ever seeing it, he was filled with melancholy, and would remain for hours in deep thought; thus he became really ill, and every day continued to grow worse.

One day he summoned his three sons before him and said, “My dear children, you see the sad state I am in. If I could but hear the bird Ohnivak sing just once I should be cured of this disease of the heart; otherwise it will be my death. Whichever of you shall succeed in catching Ohnivak alive and inducing him to sing to me, to him I will give half of my kingdom and the heirship to the throne.”

Having taken leave of their father the brothers set off. They travelled together until they came to a part of the forest where the road branched off in three directions.

“Which turning shall we take?” asked the eldest.

The second brother answered, “We are three, and three roads lie before us; let us each choose one, thus we shall treble our chances of finding the bird, for we shall seek it in three different countries.”

“That is a good idea, but how shall each one decide which way to choose?”

The youngest brother said, “I will leave the choice to you two, and will take whichever road you leave me.”

So each took the road that chance decided for him, agreeing that when their mission was over they would

return to the point of departure. In order to recognise the place again each one planted the branch of a tree at the cross roads, and they believed that he whose branch should take root and grow into a big tree would be successful in the quest.

When each one had planted his branch at the chosen road they started off. The eldest rode on, and never stopped until he reached the top of a high mountain; there he dismounted, and let his horse graze while he ate his breakfast. Suddenly a red fox came up, and speaking in the language of men, said: "Pray, my handsome prince, give me a little of what you are eating; I am very hungry."

For answer the prince let fly an arrow from his crossbow, but it is impossible to say whether he hit the fox for it vanished and did not appear again.

The second brother, without meeting with any adventure, reached a wide-stretching moor, where he stopped for his meal. The red fox appeared to him and begged for food; but he also refused food to the famished fox, and shot at him. The creature disappeared as before.

The youngest travelled on till he came to the banks of a river. Feeling tired and hungry, he got down from his horse and began his breakfast; while he was eating, up came the red fox.

"Please, young sir," said the fox, "give me a morsel to satisfy my hunger."

The prince threw him a piece of meat, and spoke kindly to him.

"Come near, do not be afraid, my red fox; I see you are more hungry than I, but there is enough for us both."

And he divided all his provisions into two equal parts, one for himself, and one for the poor red fox.

When the latter had eaten to his heart's content, he said: "You have fed me well, in return I will serve you well; mount your horse and follow me. If you do everything I tell you, the Bird of Fire shall be yours."

Then he set off at a run before the horseman, clearing the road for him with his bushy tail. By means of this marvellous broom, mountains were cut down, ravines filled up, and rivers bridged over.

The young prince followed at a gallop, without the slightest wish to stop, until they came to a castle built of copper.

“The Bird of Fire is in this castle,” said the fox; “you must enter exactly at midday, for then the guards will be asleep, and you will pass unnoticed. Above all, beware of stopping anywhere. In the first apartment you will find twelve birds black as night, in golden cages; in the second, twelve golden birds in wooden cages; in the third, Ohnivak, the bird of fire, roosting on his perch. Near him are two cages, one of wood and the other of gold; be sure you put him in the wooden cage—you would be sorry for it if he were put into the golden one.”

The prince entered the castle, and found everything just as the fox had told him. Having passed through the two rooms he came to the third, and there saw the fire-bird on his perch, apparently asleep. It was indeed a beautiful creature, so beautiful that the prince’s heart beat high with joy. He handled him without difficulty, and put him into the wooden cage, thinking at the same time to himself that it could hardly be right for so lovely a bird to be in such an ugly cage, a golden cage could be the only right place for him. So he took him out of the wooden cage and placed him in the golden one. Hardly had he shut the door when the bird opened his eyes and gave a piercing scream; so shrill was it that it awoke the other birds, who began to sing as loud as they could, and gave the alarm to the guards at the palace door. These rushed in, seized the prince, and dragged him before the king. The latter was very angry, and said: “Infamous thief, who are you to have dared to force an entrance, and pass through my sentinels, to steal my bird Ohnivak?”

“I am not a thief,” answered the young prince indignantly, “I have come to reclaim a thief whom you protect. I am the son of a king, and in my father’s gardens is an apple tree that bears golden fruit. It blossoms at morning-time, while during the day the flower develops into an apple that grows and ripens after sunset. Now in the night your bird robbed us of our golden apples, and though I watched and wounded him I could not catch him. My father is dying with grief because of this, and the only remedy that can save and restore him to health, is that he may listen to the fire-bird’s song. This is why I beg your majesty to give him me.”

“You may have him,” said the king, “but on one condition, that you bring me Zlato-Nrivak, the horse with the golden mane.”

So the prince had to go away empty-handed.

“Why did you not do as I told you? Why must you go and take the golden cage?” said the fox, in despair at the failure of the expedition.

“I admit it was my own fault,” said the prince, “but do not punish me by being angry. I want your advice: tell me how I am to get Zlato-Nrivak?”

“I know how it can be done,” answered the red fox, “and I will help you once more. Get on your horse, follow me, and do as I tell you.”

The fox ran on in front, clearing the road with his bushy tail. The prince followed at a gallop, until they came to a castle built entirely of silver.

“In that castle lives the Horse with the Golden Mane,” said the fox. “You will have to go exactly at midday, when the sentinels are asleep; thus you will get past safe and sound. But mind, do not stop anywhere. You must pass through three stables. In the first are twelve black horses with golden bridles; in the second, twelve white horses with black bridles; in the third stands Zlato-Nrivak in front of his manger, while near him are two bridles, one of gold, the other of black leather. Whatever you do, beware of using the first, for you will surely repent it.”

The prince waited until the appointed time and then entered the castle, finding everything exactly as the fox had said. In the third stable stood Zlato-Nrivak, eating fire that flared up out of his silver trough.

The Horse with the Golden Mane was so beautiful that the prince could not take his eyes off him. Quickly unhooking the black leather bridle, he put it over the horse’s head. The animal made no resistance, but was gentle and quiet as a lamb. Then the prince looked covetously at the golden bridle sparkling with gems, and said to himself, “It is a shame that such a splendid creature should be guided by these ugly black reins while there is a bridle here far more suited to him, and that is indeed his by right.” So, forgetting his late experience and the warnings of the red fox, he tore off the black bridle and put in its place that of gold set with precious stones. No sooner did the horse feel the change than he began to neigh and caper about, while all the other horses answered with a perfect storm of neighings. The sentinels, aroused by the noise, ran in, and seizing the

prince, led him before the king.

“Insolent thief,” cried the enraged monarch, “how is it that you have escaped the vigilance of the guards and have dared to lay hands upon my horse with the golden mane? It is really disgraceful.”

“True, I am nothing better,” replied the prince proudly, “but I was forced to do it against my will.” And he related all his misadventures at the copper castle, adding that it was impossible to obtain the fire-bird except in exchange for Zlato-Nrivak, and that he hoped his majesty would make him a present of the horse.

“Most willingly,” answered the king, “but on one condition, that you bring me the Maiden with the Golden Locks: she lives in the golden castle on the shores of the Black Sea.”

The fox was waiting in the forest the prince’s return, and when he saw him come back without the horse he was very angry indeed.

“Did I not warn you,” said he, “to be content with the black leather bridle? It is really a loss of time to try and help such an ungrateful fellow, for it seems impossible to make you hear reason.”

“Don’t be cross,” said the prince, “I confess that I am in fault; I ought to have obeyed your orders. But have a little more patience with me and help me out of this difficulty.”

“Very well; but this will certainly be the last time. If you do just as you are told we may yet repair all that has been spoilt by your imprudence. Mount your horse and follow—off!”

The fox ran on in front, clearing the road with his bushy tail, until they reached the shores of the Black Sea.

“That palace yonder,” said the fox, “is the residence of the Queen of the Ocean Kingdom. She has three daughters; it is the youngest who has the golden hair, and is called Zlato-Vlaska. Now you must first go to the queen and ask her to give you one of her daughters in marriage. If she takes kindly to your proposal she will bid you choose, and mind you take that princess who is the most plainly dressed.”

The queen received him most graciously, and when he explained the object of his visit she led him into a room where the three daughters were spinning.

They were so much alike that no one could possibly distinguish one from the other, and they were all so

marvellously lovely that when the young prince looked upon them he dared hardly breathe. Their hair was carefully covered by a veil through which one could not distinguish the colour of it, but their dresses were different. The first wore a gown and veil embroidered with gold, and used a golden distaff; the second had on a gown embroidered with silver and held a distaff of the same metal; the third wore a gown and veil of dazzling whiteness, and her distaff was made of wood.

The mother bade the prince choose, whereupon he pointed to the maiden clothed in white, saying, "Give me this one to wife."

"Ah," said the queen, "some one has been letting you into the secret: but wait a little, we shall meet again to-morrow."

All that night the prince lay awake, wondering how he should manage not to make a mistake on the morrow. At dawn he was already at the palace gates, which he had hardly entered when the princess clothed in white chanced to pass: it was Zlato-Vlaska, and she had come to meet him.

"If it is your wish to choose me again to-day," she said, "observe carefully, and take the maiden around whose head buzzes a small fly."

In the afternoon the queen took the prince into a room where her three daughters sat, and said: "If among these princesses you recognise the one you chose yesterday she shall be yours; if not, you must die."

The young girls stood side by side, dressed alike in costly robes, and all had golden hair. The prince was puzzled, and their beauty and splendour dazzled him. For some time he could hardly see distinctly; then, all of a sudden, a small fly buzzed over the head of one of the princesses.

"This is the maiden who belongs to me," cried he, "and whom I chose yesterday."

The queen, astonished that he should have guessed correctly, said, "Quite right, but I cannot let you have her until you have submitted to another trial, which shall be explained to you to-morrow."

On the morrow she pointed out to him a large fish-pond which lay in the forest, and giving him a small golden sieve, said: "If with this sieve you can, before sunset, empty that fish-pond yonder, I will give you my daughter with the golden hair, but if you fail you will lose your life."

The prince took the sieve, and, going down to the pond, plunged it in to try his luck; but no sooner had he lifted it up than all the water ran out through the holes—not a drop was left behind. Not knowing what to do, he sat down on the bank with the sieve in his hand, wondering in what possible way the difficulty might be overcome.

"Why are you so sad?" asked the maiden in white, as she came towards him.

"Because I fear you will never be mine," sighed he; "your mother has given me an impossible task."

"Come, cheer up, away with fear; it will all be right in the end."

Thereupon she took the sieve and threw it into the fishpond. Instantly the water turned to foam on the surface, and a thick vapour rose up, which fell in a fog so dense that nothing could be seen through it. Then the prince heard footsteps, and turning round saw his horse coming towards him, with his bridle down and the red fox at his side.

"Mount quickly," said the horse, "there is not a moment to lose; lift the maiden in front of you."

The faithful steed flew like an arrow, and sped rapidly along over the road that had been recently cleared by the bushy tail of the red fox. But this time, instead of leading, the red fox followed, his tail working marvels as he went: it destroyed the bridges, reopened the ravines, raised high mountains, and in fact put back everything as it used to be.

The prince felt very happy as he rode along, holding the Princess with the Golden Hair, but it saddened him much to think he would have to give up all thought of marrying her himself, and that within a few short hours he must leave her with the king of the silver palace: the nearer he came to it, the more wretched he grew. The red fox, who noticed this, said: "It appears to me that you do not want to exchange the lovely Zlato-Vlaska for the Horse with the Golden Mane: is it not so? Well, I have helped you so far, I will see what I can do for you now."

And having thus spoken he turned a somersault over the stump of a fallen tree which lay in the forest: while, to the prince's amazement, he was immediately transformed into a young girl exactly resembling the Princess with the Golden Hair.

"Now, leave your real bride in the forest," said the transformed fox, "and take me with you to offer to the king of the silver palace in exchange for his horse Zlato-Nrivak. Mount the horse, return here, and escape with the maid you love; I will manage the rest."

The king of the silver castle received the maiden without the least suspicion, and handed over in exchange the Horse with the Golden Mane, over whose back lay the bejewelled bridle. The prince left at once.

At the palace all were busy preparing the wedding feast, for the marriage was to take place immediately, and everything was to be of the most costly description. Invitations had been out to all the grandees of the land.

Towards the end of the feast, when every one had drunk his fill of wine and pleasure, the king asked his guests their opinions on the charms of his bride.

"She is most beautiful," said one, "in fact, it would be impossible for her to be more lovely; only, it seems to me that her eyes are somewhat like those of a fox."

The words were hardly out of his mouth when the royal bride vanished, while in her place sat a red fox, who with one vigorous bound sprang through the door and disappeared to rejoin the prince, who had hastened on in front. With sweeping strokes of his bushy tail he overthrew bridges, reopened precipices, and heaped up mountains; but it was very hard work for the poor thing, and he did not come up with the runaways until they had almost reached the copper castle. Here they all had a rest, while the red fox turned a somersault and transformed himself into a horse resembling the one with the golden mane. Then the prince entered the copper castle and exchanged the transformed fox for the fire-bird Ohnivak, the king having no suspicions whatever. The red fox, having thus deceived the monarch, reassumed his own shape and hurried after the departing prince, whom he did not overtake until they had reached the banks of the river where they had first become acquainted.

"Now here you are, prince," said the red fox, "in possession of Ohnivak, of the lovely Zlato-Vlaska, and of the

Horse with the Golden Mane. Henceforth you can manage without my help, so return to your father's house in peace and joy; but, take warning, do not stop anywhere on the way, for if you do some misfortune will overtake you."

With these words the red fox vanished, while the prince continued his journey unhindered. In his hand he held the golden cage that contained the fire-bird, and at his side the lovely Zlato-Vlaska rode the Horse with the Golden Mane; truly, he was the happiest of men.

When he reached the cross roads where he had parted from his brothers, he hastened to look for the branches they had planted. His alone had become a spreading tree, theirs were both withered. Delighted with this proof of divine favour, he felt a strong desire to rest for a while under the shadow of his own tree; he therefore dismounted, and assisting the princess to do the same, fastened their horses to one of the branches and hung up the cage containing Ohnivak on another: within a few moments they were all sound asleep.

Meanwhile the two elder brothers arrived at the same place by different roads, and both with empty hands. There they found their two branches withered, that of their brother having grown into a splendid tree. Under the shade of the latter he lay sleeping; by his side was the Maid with the Golden Locks; the horse, Zlato-Nrivak, was fastened to a tree, and the fire-bird roosted in his golden cage.

The hearts of the two brothers were filled with envious and wicked thoughts, and they whispered thus to one another, "Just think what will become of us—the youngest will receive half of the kingdom during our father's life and succeed to the throne at his death; why not cut his throat at once? One of us will take the Maid with the Golden Locks, the other can carry the bird to our father and keep the Horse with the Golden Mane; as for the kingdom, we will divide it between us."

After this debate they killed their youngest brother and cut up his body into small pieces, while they threatened to treat Zlato-Vlaska in the same way if she attempted to disobey them.

On reaching home they sent the Horse with the Golden Mane to the marble stables, the cage containing Ohnivak was placed in the room where their father lay sick, and the princess was allowed a beautiful suite of apartments and maids of honour to attend her.

When the king, who was much weakened by suffering, had looked at the bird, he asked after his youngest son.

To which the brothers replied: "We have not seen or heard anything of him, it is very likely that he has been killed."

The poor old man was much affected—it seemed, indeed, as if his last hour had come. The fire-bird moped and refused to sing; the Horse with the Golden Mane stood with his head bent down before his manger, and would eat no food; while Princess Zlato-Vlaska remained as silent as if she had been born dumb, her beautiful hair was neglected and uncombed, and she wept—her tears fell fast.

Now as the red fox chanced to pass through the forest he came upon the mangled body of the youngest brother, and he at once set to work to put the scattered pieces together, but was unable to restore them to life. At that moment a raven, accompanied by two young ones, came hovering overhead. The fox crouched behind a bramble bush; and when one of the young birds alighted upon the body to feed, he seized it and made a pretence of strangling it. Upon which the parent bird, full of anxious love and fear, perched upon a branch close by and croaked as if to say, "Let my poor little nestling go. I have done you no harm, neither have I worried you; let him free, and I will take the first opportunity of returning your kindness."

"Just so," replied the red fox, "for I am greatly in need of some kindness. Now if you will fetch me some of the Water of Death, and some of the Water of Life, from the Red Sea, I will let your nestling go safe and sound."

The old raven promised to fetch the water, and went off at once.

Within three days he returned, carrying in his beak two small bottles, one full of the Water of Death, the other of the Water of Life. When the red fox received them he wished first to try their effect upon some living creature, so he cut the small raven up, and joining the pieces together, watered them with the Water of Death. Instantly they became a living bird, without mark or join anywhere. This he sprinkled with the Water of Life, upon which the young raven spread its wings and flew off to its family.

The red fox then performed the same operation on the body of the young prince, and with the same happy result, for he rose again perfect in form, and having about him no wound scars. On coming to life again, all he said was, "Dear me! What a pleasant sleep I have had."

"I believe you," replied the red fox, "you would have gone on sleeping for ever if I had not awakened you. And what a foolish young man you are: did I not particularly order you not to stop anywhere, but to go straight back

to your father's house?"

He then related all that his brothers had done, and having obtained a peasant's dress for him, led him to the outskirts of the forest, close to the royal palace, where he left him.

The young prince then entered the palace grounds, unrecognised by the servants, and on representing that he was in need of employment, was appointed stable-boy to the royal stables. Some little time after he heard the grooms lamenting that the Horse with the Golden Mane would eat no food.

"What a pity it is," said they, "that this splendid steed should starve to death; he droops his head and will take nothing."

"Give him," said the disguised prince, "some pea-straw; I bet you anything he will eat that."

"But do you really think so? Why, our rough draught horses would refuse such coarse food."

The prince's only answer was to fetch a bundle of pea-straw, which he put into Zlato-Nrivak's marble trough: then, passing his hand gently over his neck and mane, he said to him, "Grieve no more, my horse with the golden mane."

The beautiful creature recognised his master's voice, and neighing with joy, greedily devoured the pea-straw.

The news was noised about from one end of the palace to the other, and the sick king summoned the boy to his presence.

"I hear you have made Zlato-Nrivak eat," said his majesty; "do you think you could make my fire-bird sing? Go and examine him closely: he is very sad, he droops his wings, and will neither eat nor drink. Ah me! if he dies I shall certainly die too."

"Your majesty may rest assured, the bird will not die. Let him have some husks of barley to eat, then he will soon be all right and begin to sing."

The king ordered them to be brought, and the disguised prince put a handful into Ohnivak's cage, saying, "Cheer up, my fire-bird."

As soon as Ohnivak heard his master's voice he shook himself, and made his feathers shine with more than their usual brightness. Then he began to dance about his cage, and pecking up the husks, sang so exquisitely that the king immediately felt better, and it was as if a great weight had been lifted off his heart. The fire-bird again burst into song, and this so affected the king that he sat up quite well, and embraced the disguised prince out of very gratitude.

"Now," said he, "teach me how to restore to health this beautiful maiden with the golden hair whom my sons brought back with them; for she will not speak a word, her beautiful hair remains uncared for, and her tears fall night and day."

"If your majesty will allow me to speak a few words to her, it may be the means of making her bright and happy."

The king himself led the way to her apartments, and the disguised prince, taking her hand, said: "Look up a moment, sweetheart; why these tears? And why grieve thus, dear bride?"

The maiden knew him at once, and with a cry of joy threw herself into his arms. This astonished the king mightily, and he could not for the life of him think how a stable-boy dare address such a princess as his "dear bride."

The prince then addressed the king thus: "And are you indeed the only one who does not know me? How is it, my father and sovereign, that you have not recognised your youngest son? I alone have succeeded in obtaining the Fire-Bird, the Horse with the Golden Mane, and the Maid with the Golden Hair."

Thereupon he related all his adventures, and Zlato-Vlaska in her turn told how the wicked brothers had threatened to kill her if she betrayed them. As for these bad men, they shook from head to foot, and trembled like leaves in the wind. The indignant king ordered them to be executed then and there.

Not very long after these events the youngest prince married the beautiful Zlato-Vlaska, and the king gave him half of his kingdom as a wedding present. When the old king died he reigned in his stead, and lived happily with the princess ever after.

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