



The Abode of the Gods - 1. The Two Brothers

Fairy Tales Of The Slav Peasants And Herdsmen

Slavic

*Intermediate
7 min read*

Once upon a time there were two brothers whose father had left them but a small fortune. The eldest grew very rich, but at the same time cruel and wicked, whereas there was nowhere a more honest or kinder man than the younger. But he remained poor, and had many children, so that at times they could scarcely get bread to eat. At last, one day there was not even this in the house, so he went to his rich brother and asked him for a loaf of bread. Waste of time! His rich brother only called him beggar and vagabond, and slammed the door in his face.

The poor fellow, after this brutal reception, did not know which way to turn. Hungry, scantily clad, shivering with cold, his legs could scarcely carry him along. He had not the heart to go home, with nothing for the children, so he went towards the mountain forest. But all he found there were some wild pears that had fallen to the ground. He had to content himself with eating these, though they set his teeth on edge. But what was he to do to warm himself, for the east wind with its chill blast pierced him through and through. "Where shall I go?" he said; "what will become of us in the cottage? There is neither food nor fire, and my brother has driven me from his door." It was just then he remembered having heard that the top of the mountain in front of him was made of crystal, and had a fire for ever burning upon it. "I will try and find it," he said, "and then I may be

able to warm myself a little.” So he went on climbing higher and higher till he reached the top, when he was startled to see twelve strange beings sitting round a huge fire. He stopped for a moment, but then said to himself, “What have I to lose? Why should I fear? God is with me. Courage!”

So he advanced towards the fire, and bowing respectfully, said: “Good people, take pity on my distress. I am very poor, no one cares for me, I have not even a fire in my cottage; will you let me warm myself at yours?” They all looked kindly at him, and one of them said: “My son, come sit down with us and warm yourself.”

So he sat down, and felt warm directly he was near them. But he dared not speak while they were silent. What astonished him most was that they changed seats one after another, and in such a way that each one passed round the fire and came back to his own place. When he drew near the fire an old man with long white beard and bald head arose from the flames and spoke to him thus:

“Man, waste not thy life here; return to thy cottage, work, and live honestly. Take as many embers as thou wilt, we have more than we need.”

And having said this he disappeared. Then the twelve filled a large sack with embers, and, putting it on the poor man’s shoulders, advised him to hasten home.

Humbly thanking them, he set off. As he went he wondered why the embers did not feel hot, and why they should weigh no more than a sack of paper. He was thankful that he should be able to have a fire, but imagine his astonishment when on arriving home he found the sack to contain as many gold pieces as there had been embers; he almost went out of his mind with joy at the possession of so much money. With all his heart he thanked those who had been so ready to help him in his need.

He was now rich, and rejoiced to be able to provide for his family. Being curious to find out how many gold pieces there were, and not knowing how to count, he sent his wife to his rich brother for the loan of a quart measure.

This time the brother was in a better temper, so he lent what was asked of him, but said mockingly, “What can such beggars as you have to measure?”

The wife replied, "Our neighbour owes us some wheat; we want to be sure he returns us the right quantity."

The rich brother was puzzled, and suspecting something he, unknown to his sister-in-law, put some grease inside the measure. The trick succeeded, for on getting it back he found a piece of gold sticking to it. Filled with astonishment, he could only suppose his brother had joined a band of robbers: so he hurried to his brother's cottage, and threatened to bring him before the Justice of the Peace if he did not confess where the gold came from. The poor man was troubled, and, dreading to offend his brother, told the story of his journey to the Crystal Mountain.

Now the elder brother had plenty of money for himself, yet he was envious of the brother's good fortune, and became greatly displeased when he found that his brother won every one's esteem by the good use he made of his wealth. At last he determined to visit the Crystal Mountain himself.

"I may meet with as good luck as my brother," said he to himself.

Upon reaching the Crystal Mountain he found the twelve seated round the fire as before, and thus addressed them:

"I beg of you, good people, to let me warm myself, for it is bitterly cold, and I am poor and homeless."

But one of them replied, "My son, the hour of thy birth was favourable; thou art rich, but a miser; thou art wicked, for thou hast dared to lie to us. Well dost thou deserve thy punishment."

Amazed and terrified he stood silent, not daring to speak. Meanwhile the twelve changed places one after another, each at last returning to his own seat. Then from the midst of the flames arose the white-bearded old man and spoke thus sternly to the rich man:

"Woe unto the wilful! Thy brother is virtuous, therefore have I blessed him. As for thee, thou art wicked, and so shalt not escape our vengeance."

At these words the twelve arose. The first seized the unfortunate man, struck him, and passed him on to the second; the second also struck him and passed him on to the third; and so did they all in their turn, until he was given up to the old man, who disappeared with him into the fire.

Days, weeks, months went by, but the rich man never returned, and none knew what had become of him. I think, between you and me, the younger brother had his suspicions but he very wisely kept them to himself.

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