



The Abode of the Gods - 3. The Twelve Months

Fairy Tales Of The Slav Peasants And Herdsmen

Slavic

Intermediate
12 min read

There was once a widow who had two daughters, Helen, her own child by her dead husband, and Marouckla, his daughter by his first wife. She loved Helen, but hated the poor orphan, because she was far prettier than her own daughter. Marouckla did not think about her good looks, and could not understand why her stepmother should be angry at the sight of her. The hardest work fell to her share; she cleaned out the rooms, cooked, washed, sewed, spun, wove, brought in the hay, milked the cow, and all this without any help. Helen, meanwhile, did nothing but dress herself in her best clothes and go to one amusement after another. But Marouckla never complained; she bore the scoldings and bad temper of mother and sister with a smile on her lips, and the patience of a lamb. But this angelic behaviour did not soften them. They became even more tyrannical and grumpy, for Marouckla grew daily more beautiful, while Helen's ugliness increased. So the stepmother determined to get rid of Marouckla, for she knew that while she remained her own daughter would have no suitors. Hunger, every kind of privation, abuse, every means was used to make the girl's life miserable. The most wicked of men could not have been more mercilessly cruel than these two vixens. But in spite of it all Marouckla grew ever sweeter and more charming.

One day in the middle of winter Helen wanted some wood-violets.

“Listen,” cried she to Marouckla; “you must go up the mountain and find me some violets, I want some to put in my gown; they must be fresh and sweet-scented—do you hear?”

“But, my dear sister, who ever heard of violets blooming in the snow?” said the poor orphan.

“You wretched creature! Do you dare to disobey me?” said Helen. “Not another word; off with you. If you do not bring me some violets from the mountain forest, I will kill you.”

The stepmother also added her threats to those of Helen, and with vigorous blows they pushed Marouckla outside and shut the door upon her. The weeping girl made her way to the mountain. The snow lay deep, and there was no trace of any human being. Long she wandered hither and thither, and lost herself in the wood. She was hungry, and shivered with cold, and prayed to die. Suddenly she saw a light in the distance, and climbed towards it, till she reached the top of the mountain. Upon the highest peak burnt a large fire, surrounded by twelve blocks of stone, on which sat twelve strange beings. Of these the first three had white hair, three were not quite so old, three were young and handsome, and the rest still younger.

There they all sate silently looking at the fire. They were the twelve months of the year. The great Setchène (January) was placed higher than the others; his hair and moustache were white as snow, and in his hand he held a wand. At first Marouckla was afraid, but after a while her courage returned, and drawing near she said:

“Men of God, may I warm myself at your fire? I am chilled by the winter cold.”

The great Setchène raised his head and answered:

“What brings thee here, my daughter? What dost thou seek?”

“I am looking for violets,” replied the maiden.

“This is not the season for violets; dost thou not see the snow everywhere?” said Setchène.

“I know well, but my sister Helen and my stepmother have ordered me to bring them violets from your mountain: if I return without them they will kill me. I pray you, good shepherds, tell me where they may be

found?”

Here the great Setchène arose and went over to the youngest of the months, and placing his wand in his hand, said:

“Brother Brezène (March), do thou take the highest place.”

Brezène obeyed, at the same time waving his wand over the fire. Immediately the flames rose towards the sky, the snow began to melt and the trees and shrubs to bud; the grass became green, and from between its blades peeped the pale primrose. It was Spring, and the meadows were blue with violets.

“Gather them quickly, Marouckla,” said Brezène.

Joyfully she hastened to pick the flowers, and having soon a large bunch she thanked them and ran home. Helen and the stepmother were amazed at the sight of the flowers, the scent of which filled the house.

“Where did you find them?” asked Helen.

“Under the trees on the mountain slope,” said Marouckla.

Helen kept the flowers for herself and her mother; she did not even thank her step-sister for the trouble she had taken. The next day she desired Marouckla to fetch her strawberries.

“Run,” said she, “and fetch me strawberries from the mountain: they must be very sweet and ripe.”

“But who ever heard of strawberries ripening in the snow?” exclaimed Marouckla.

“Hold your tongue, worm; don’t answer me; if I don’t have my strawberries I will kill you.”

Then the stepmother pushed her into the yard and bolted the door. The unhappy girl made her way towards the mountain and to the large fire round which sat the twelve months. The great Setchène occupied the highest place.

“Men of God, may I warm myself at your fire? The winter cold chills me,” said she, drawing near.

The great Setchène raised his head and asked:

“Why comest thou here? What dost thou seek?”

“I am looking for strawberries,” said she.

“We are in the midst of winter,” replied Setchène; “strawberries do not grow in the snow.”

“I know,” said the girl sadly, “but my sister and stepmother have ordered me to bring them strawberries; if I do not they will kill me. Pray, good shepherds, tell me where to find them.”

The great Setchène arose, crossed over to the month opposite him, and putting the wand into his hand, said:

“Brother Tchervène (June), do thou take the highest place.”

Tchervène obeyed, and as he waved his wand over the fire the flames leapt towards the sky. Instantly the snow melted, the earth was covered with verdure, trees were clothed with leaves, birds began to sing, and various flowers blossomed in the forest. It was summer. Under the bushes masses of star-shaped flowers changed into ripening strawberries. Before Marouckla had time to cross herself they covered the glade, making it look like a sea of blood.

“Gather them quickly, Marouckla,” said Tchervène.

Joyfully she thanked the months, and having filled her apron ran happily home. Helen and her mother wondered at seeing the strawberries, which filled the house with their delicious fragrance.

“Wherever did you find them?” asked Helen crossly.

“Right up among the mountains; those from under the beech trees are not bad.”

Helen gave a few to her mother and ate the rest herself; not one did she offer to her step-sister. Being tired of strawberries, on the third day she took a fancy for some fresh red apples.

“Run, Marouckla,” said she, “and fetch me fresh red apples from the mountain.”

“Apples in winter, sister? why, the trees have neither leaves nor fruit.”

“Idle slut, go this minute,” said Helen; “unless you bring back apples we will kill you.”

As before, the stepmother seized her roughly and turned her out of the house. The poor girl went weeping up the mountain, across the deep snow upon which lay no human footprint, and on towards the fire round which were the twelve months. Motionless sat they, and on the highest stone was the great Setchène.

“Men of God, may I warm myself at your fire? The winter cold chills me,” said she, drawing near.

The great Setchène raised his head.

“Why com’st thou here? What dost thou seek?” asked he.

“I am come to look for red apples,” replied Marouckla.

“But this is winter, and not the season for red apples,” observed the great Setchène.

“I know,” answered the girl, “but my sister and stepmother sent me to fetch red apples from the mountain; if I return without them they will kill me.”

Thereupon the great Setchène arose and went over to one of the elderly months, to whom he handed the wand, saying:

“Brother Zaré (September), do thou take the highest place.”

Zaré moved to the highest stone and waved his wand over the fire. There was a flare of red flames, the snow disappeared, but the fading leaves which trembled on the trees were sent by a cold north-east wind in yellow masses to the glade. Only a few flowers of autumn were visible, such as the fleabane and red gillyflower, autumn colchicums in the ravine, and under the beeches bracken and tufts of northern heather. At first Marouckla looked in vain for red apples. Then she espied a tree which grew at a great height, and from the branches of this hung the bright red fruit. Zaré ordered her to gather some quickly. The girl was delighted and shook the tree. First one apple fell, then another.

“That is enough,” said Zaré, “hurry home.”

Thanking the months, she returned joyfully. Helen marvelled and the stepmother wondered at seeing the fruit.

“Where did you gather them?” asked the step-sister.

“There are more on the mountain top,” answered Marouckla.

“Then why did you not bring more?” said Helen angrily; “you must have eaten them on your way back, you wicked girl.”

“No, dear sister, I have not even tasted them,” said Marouckla. “I shook the tree twice; one apple fell each time. I was not allowed to shake it again, but was told to return home.”

“May Perum smite you with his thunderbolt,” said Helen, striking her.

Marouckla prayed to die rather than suffer such ill-treatment. Weeping bitterly, she took refuge in the kitchen. Helen and her mother found the apples more delicious than any they had ever tasted, and when they had eaten both longed for more.

“Listen, mother,” said Helen. “Give me my cloak; I will fetch some more apples myself, or else that good-for-nothing wretch will eat them all on the way. I shall be able to find the mountain and the tree. The shepherds may cry ‘Stop,’ but I shall not leave go till I have shaken down all the apples.”

In spite of her mother’s advice she put on her pelisse, covered her head with a warm hood, and took the road to the mountain. The mother stood and watched her till she was lost in the distance.

Snow covered everything, not a human footprint was to be seen on its surface. Helen lost herself and wandered hither and thither. After a while she saw a light above her, and following in its direction reached the mountain top. There was the flaming fire, the twelve blocks of stone, and the twelve months. At first she was frightened and hesitated; then she came nearer and warmed her hands. She did not ask permission, nor did she speak one polite word.

“What has brought thee here? What dost thou seek?” said the great Setchène severely.

“I am not obliged to tell you, old greybeard; what business is it of yours?” she replied disdainfully, turning her back on the fire and going towards the forest.

The great Setchène frowned, and waved his wand over his head. Instantly the sky became covered with clouds, the fire went down, snow fell in large flakes, an icy wind howled round the mountain. Amid the fury of the storm Helen added curses against her step-sister. The pelisse failed to warm her benumbed limbs. The mother kept on waiting for her; she looked from the window, she watched from the doorstep, but her daughter came not. The hours passed slowly, but Helen did not return.

“Can it be that the apples have charmed her from her home?” thought the mother. Then she clad herself in hood and pelisse and went in search of her daughter. Snow fell in huge masses; it covered all things, it lay untouched by human footsteps. For long she wandered hither and thither; the icy north-east wind whistled in the mountain, but no voice answered her cries.

Day after day Marouckla worked and prayed, and waited; but neither stepmother nor sister returned, they had been frozen to death on the mountain. The inheritance of a small house, a field, and a cow fell to Marouckla. In course of time an honest farmer came to share them with her, and their lives were happy and peaceful.

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