



The Good Ferryman and the Water Nymphs

Polish Fairy Tales

Polish

Intermediate
18 min read

There was once an old man, very poor, with three sons. They lived chiefly by ferrying people over a river; but he had had nothing but ill-luck all his life. And to crown all, on the night he died, there was a great storm, and in it the crazy old ferry-boat, on which his sons depended for a living, was sunk.

As they were lamenting both their father and their poverty, an old man came by, and learning the reason of their sorrow said:

“Never mind; all will come right in time. Look! there is your boat as good as new.”

And there was a fine new ferry-boat on the water, in place of the old one, and a number of people waiting to be ferried over.

The three brothers arranged to take turns with the boat, and divide the fares they took.

They were however very different in disposition. The two elder brothers were greedy and avaricious, and would never take anyone over the river, without being handsomely paid for it.

But the youngest brother took over poor people, who had no money, for nothing; and moreover frequently relieved their wants out of his own pocket.

One day, at sunset, when the eldest brother was at the ferry the same old man, who had visited them on the night their father died, came, and asked for a passage.

“I have nothing to pay you with, but this empty purse,” he said.

“Go and get something to put in it then first,” replied the ferry-man; “and be off with you now!”

{Note: You can read an illustrated version of this story, plus other mermaid tales, in our collection *Mermaid Tales: The Little Mermaid and 14 Other Illustrated Mermaid Stories*, now available for Amazon Kindle.}

Next day it was the second brother’s turn; and the same old man came, and offered his empty purse as his fare. But he met with a like reply.

The third day it was the youngest brother’s turn; and when the old man arrived, and asked to be ferried over for charity, he answered:

“Yes, get in, old man.”

“And what is the fare?” asked the old man.

“That depends upon whether you can pay or not,” was the reply; “but if you cannot, it is all the same to me.”

“A good deed is never without its reward,” said the old man: “but in the meantime take this empty purse; though it is very worn, and looks worth nothing. But if you shake it, and say:

‘For his sake who gave it, this purse I hold, I wish may always be full of gold;’

it will always afford you as much gold as you wish for.”



“The purse that was ever full.” Illustration by Cecile Walton, published in *Polish Fairy Tales* by Maude Ashurt Biggs (1920), John Lane Company.

The youngest brother came home, and his brothers, who were sitting over a good supper, laughed at him, because he had taken only a few copper coins that day, and they told him he should have no supper. But when he began to shake his purse and scatter gold coins all about, they jumped up from the table, and began picking them up eagerly.

And as it was share and share alike, they all grew rich very quickly. The youngest brother made good use of his riches, for he gave away money freely to the poor. But the greedy elder brothers envied him the possession of the wonderful purse, and contrived to steal it from him. Then they left their old home; and the one bought a ship, laded it with all sorts of merchandize, for a trading voyage. But the ship ran upon a rock, and every one on board was drowned. The second brother was no more fortunate, for as he was travelling through a forest, with an enormous treasure of precious stones, in which he had laid out his wealth, to sell at a profit, he was waylaid by robbers, who murdered him, and shared the spoil among them.

The youngest brother, who remained at home, having lost his purse, became as poor as before. But he still did as formerly, took pay from passengers who could afford it, ferried over poor folks for nothing, and helped those who were poorer than himself so far as he could.

One day the same old man with the long white beard came by; the ferry-man welcomed him as an old friend, and while rowing him over the river, told him all that had happened since he last saw him.

“Your brothers did very wrong, and they have paid for it,” said the old man; “but you were in fault yourself. Still, I will give you one more chance. Take this hook and line; and whatever you catch, mind you hold fast, and not let it escape you; or you will bitterly repent it.”

The old man then disappeared, and the ferry-man looked in wonder at his new fishing-tackle—a diamond hook, a silver line, and a golden rod.

All at once the hook sprang of itself into the water; the line lengthened out along the river current, and there came a strong pull upon it. The fisherman drew it in, and beheld a most lovely creature, upwards from the

waist a woman, but with a fish's tail.

“Good ferry-man, let me go,” she said; “take your hook out of my hair! The sun is setting, and after sunset I can no longer be a water-nymph again.”

But without answering, the ferry-man only held her fast, and covered her over with his coat, to prevent her escaping. Then the sun set, and she lost her fish-tail.

“Now,” she said: “I am yours; so let us go to the nearest church and get married.”

She was already dressed as a bride, with a myrtle garland on her head, in a white dress, with a rainbow-coloured girdle, and rich jewels in her hair and on her neck. And she held in her hand the wonderful purse, that was always full of gold.

They found the priest and all ready at the church; were married in a few minutes; and then came home to their wedding-feast, to which all the neighbours were invited. They were royally entertained, and when they were about to leave the bride shook the wonderful purse, and sent a shower of gold pieces flying among the guests; so they all went home very well pleased.

The good ferry-man and his marvellous wife lived most happily together; they never wanted for anything, and gave freely to all who came. He continued to ply his ferry-boat; but he now took all passengers over for nothing, and gave them each a piece of gold into the bargain.

Now there was a king over that country, who a year ago had just succeeded to his elder brother. He had heard of the ferry-man, who was so marvellously rich, and wishing to ascertain the truth of the story he had heard, came on purpose to see for himself. But when he saw the ferry-man's beautiful young wife, he resolved to have her for himself, and determined to get rid of her husband somehow.

At that time there was an eclipse of the sun; and the king sent for the ferry-man, and told him he must find out the cause of this eclipse, or be put to death.

He came home in great distress to his wife; but she replied:

“Never mind, my dear. I will tell you what to do, and how to gratify the king’s curiosity.”

So she gave him a wonderful ball of thread, which he was to throw before him, and follow the thread as it kept unwinding—towards the East.

He went on a long way, over high mountains, deep rivers, and wide regions. At last he came to a ruined city, where a number of corpses were lying about unburied, tainting the air with pestilence.

The good man was sorry to see this, and took the pains to summon men from the neighbouring cities, and get the bodies properly buried. He then resumed his journey.

He came at last to the ends of the earth. Here he found a magnificent golden palace, with an amber roof, and diamond doors and windows.

The ball of thread went straight into the palace, and the ferry-man found himself in a vast apartment, where sat a very dignified old lady, spinning from a golden distaff.

“Wretched man! what are you here for?” she exclaimed, when she saw him. “My son will come back presently and burn you up.”

He explained to her how he had been forced to come, out of sheer necessity.

“Well, I must help you,” replied the old lady, who was no less than the Mother of the Sun, “because you did Sol that good turn some days ago, in burying the inhabitants of that town, when they were killed by a dragon. He journeys every day across the wide arch of heaven, in a diamond car, drawn by twelve grey horses, with golden manes, giving heat and light to the whole world. He will soon be back here, to rest for the night.... But ... here he comes; hide yourself, and take care to observe what follows.”

So saying she changed her visitor into a lady-bird, and let him fly to the window.

Then the neighing of the wonderful horses and the rattling of chariot wheels were heard, and the bright Sun himself presently came in, and stretching himself upon a coral bed, remarked to his mother:

“I smell a human being here!”

“What nonsense you talk!” replied his mother. “How could any human being come here? You know it is impossible.”

The Sun, as if he did not quite believe her, began to peer anxiously about the room.

“Don’t be so restless,” said the old lady; “but tell me why you suffered eclipse a month or two ago.”

“How could I help it?” answered the Sun; “When the dragon from the deep abyss attacked me, and I had to fight him? Perhaps I should have been fighting with the monster till now, if a wonderful mermaid had not come to help me. When she began to sing, and looked at the dragon with her beautiful eyes, all his rage softened at once; he was absorbed in gazing upon her beauty, and I meanwhile burnt him to ashes, and threw them into the sea.”

The Sun then went to sleep, and his mother again touched the ferry-man with her spindle; he then returned to his natural shape, and slipped out of the palace. Following the ball of thread he reached home at last, and next day went to the king, and told him all.

But the king was so enchanted at the description of the beautiful sea-maiden, that he ordered the ferry-man to go and bring her to him, on pain of death.

He went home very sad to his wife, but she told him she would manage this also. So saying she gave him another ball of thread, to show him which way to go, and she also gave him a carriage-load of costly lady’s apparel and jewels, and ornaments—told him what he was to do, and they took leave of one another.

On the way the ferry-man met a youth, riding on a fine grey horse, who asked:

“What have you got there, man?”

“A woman’s wearing apparel, most costly and beautiful”—he had several dresses, not simply one.

“I say, give me some of those as a present for my intended, whom I am going to see. I can be of use to you, for I am the Storm-wind. I will come, whenever you call upon me thus:

‘Storm-wind! Storm-wind! come with speed! Help me in my sudden need!’”

The ferry-man gave him some of the most beautiful things he had, and the Storm-wind passed.

A little further on he met an old man, grey-haired, but strong and vigorous-looking, who also said:

“What have you got there?”

“Women’s garments costly and beautiful.”

“I am going to my daughter’s wedding; she is to marry the Storm-wind; give me something as a wedding present for her, and I will be of use to you. I am the Frost; if you need me call upon me thus:

‘Frost, I call thee; come with speed; Help me in my sudden need!’”

The ferry-man let him take all he wanted and went on.

And now he came to the sea-coast; here the ball of thread stopped, and would go no further.

The ferry-man waded up to his waist into the sea, and set up two high poles, with cross-bars between them, upon which he hung dresses of various colours, scarves, and ribbons, gold chains, and diamond earrings and pins, shoes, and looking-glasses, and then hid himself, with his wonderful hook and line ready.

As soon as the morning rose from the sea, there appeared far away on the smooth waters a silvery boat, in which stood a beautiful maiden, with a golden oar in one hand, while with the other she gathered together her long golden hair, all the while singing so beautifully to the rising sun, that, if the ferry-man had not quickly stopped his ears, he would have fallen into a delicious reverie, and then asleep.

She sailed along a long time in her silver boat, and round her leaped and played golden fishes with rainbow wings and diamond eyes. But all at once she perceived the rich clothes and ornaments, hung up on the poles, and as she came nearer, the ferry-man called out:

“Storm-wind! Storm-wind! come with speed! Help me in my sudden need!”

“What do you want?” asked the Storm-wind.

The ferry-man without answering him, called out:

“Frost, I call thee; come with speed, Help me in my sudden need!”

“What do you want?” asked the Frost.

“I want to capture the sea-maiden.”

Then the wind blew and blew, so that the silver boat was capsized, and the frost breathed on the sea till it was frozen over.

Then the ferryman rushed up to the sea-maiden, entangling his hook in her golden hair; lifted her on his horse, and rode off as swift as the wind after his wonderful ball of thread.

She kept weeping and lamenting all the way; but as soon as they reached the ferry-man’s home, and saw his wife, all her sorrow changed into joy; she laughed with delight, and threw herself into her arms.

And then it turned out that the two were sisters.

Next morning the ferry-man went to court with both his wife and sister-in-law, and the king was so delighted with the beauty of the latter, that he at once offered to marry her. But she could give him no answer until he had the Self-playing Guitar.

So the king ordered the ferry-man to procure him this wonderful guitar, or be put to death.

His wife told him what to do, and gave him a handkerchief of hers, embroidered with gold, telling him to use this in case of need.

Following the ball of thread he came at last to a great lake, in the midst of which was a green island.

He began to wonder how he was to get there, when he saw a boat approaching, in which was an old man, with a long white beard, and he recognized him with delight, as his former benefactor.

“How are you, ferry-man?” he asked. “Where are you going?”

“I am going wherever the ball of thread leads me, for I must fetch the Self-playing Guitar.”

“This guitar,” said the old man, “belongs to Goldmore, the lord of that island. It is a difficult matter to have to do with him; but perhaps you may succeed. You have often ferried me over the water; I will ferry you now.”

The old man pushed off, and they reached the island.

On arriving the ball of thread went straight into a palace, where Goldmore came out to meet the traveller, and asked him where he was going and what he wanted.

He explained:

“I am come for the Self-playing Guitar.”

“I will only let you have it on condition that you do not go to sleep for three days and nights. And if you do, you will not only lose all chance of the Self-playing Guitar; but you must die.”

What could the poor man do, but agree to this?

So Goldmore conducted him to a great room, and locked him in. The floor was strewn with sleepy-grass, so he fell asleep directly.

Next morning in came Goldmore, and on waking him up said:

“So you went to sleep! Very well, you shall die!”

And he touched a spring in the floor, and the unhappy ferry-man fell down into an apartment beneath, where the walls were of looking-glass, and there were great heaps of gold and precious stones lying about.

For three days and nights he lay there; he was fearfully hungry. And then it dawned upon him that he was to be starved to death!

He called out, and entreated in vain; nobody answered, and though he had piles of gold and jewels about him, they could not purchase him a morsel of food.

He sought in vain for any means of exit. There was a window, of clearest crystal, but it was barred by a heavy iron grating. But the window looked into a garden whence he could hear nightingales singing, doves cooing, and the murmur of a brook. But inside he saw only heaps of useless gold and jewels, and his own face, worn and haggard, reflected a thousand times.

He could now only pray for a speedy death, and took out a little iron cross, which he had kept by him since his boyhood. But in doing so he also drew out the gold-embroidered handkerchief, given him by his wife, and which he had quite forgotten till now.

Goldmore had been looking on, as he often did, from an opening in the ceiling to enjoy the sight of his prisoner's sufferings. All at once he recognized the handkerchief, as belonging to his own sister, the ferry-man's wife.

He at once changed his treatment of his brother-in-law, as he had discovered him to be; took him out of prison, led him to his own apartments, gave him food and drink, and the Self-playing Guitar into the bargain.

Coming home, the ferry-man met his wife half-way.

"The ball of thread came home alone," she explained; "so I judged that some misfortune had befallen you, and I was coming to help you."

He told her all his adventures, and they returned home together.

The king was all eagerness to see and hear the Self-playing Guitar; so he ordered the ferry-man, his wife, and her sister to come with it to the palace at once.

Now the property of this Self-playing Guitar was such that wherever its music was heard, the sick became well, those who were sad merry, ugly folks became handsome, sorceries were dissolved, and those who had been

murdered rose from the dead, and slew their murderers.

So when the king, having been told the charm to set the guitar playing, said the words, all the court began to be merry, and dance—except the king himself!... For all at once the door opened, the music ceased, and the figure of the late king stood up in his shroud, and said:

“I was the rightful possessor of the throne! and you, wicked brother, who caused me to be murdered, shall now reap your reward!”

So saying he breathed upon him, and the king fell dead—on which the phantom vanished.

But as soon as they recovered from their fright, all the nobility who were present acclaimed the ferry-man as their king.

The next day, after the burial of the late king, the beautiful sea-maiden, the beloved of the Sun, went back to the sea, to float about in her silvery canoe, in the company of the rainbow fishes, and to rejoice in the sunbeams.

But the good ferry-man and his wife lived happily ever after, as king and queen. And they gave a grand ball to the nobility and to the people.... The Self-playing Guitar furnished the music, the wonderful purse scattered gold all the time, and the king entertained all the guests right royally.

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