



The Prince with the Golden Hand

Fairy Tales Of The Slav Peasants And Herdsmen

Slavic

Intermediate
26 min read

There once lived a king and queen who had an only daughter. And the beauty of this princess surpassed everything seen or heard of. Her forehead was brilliant as the moon, her lips like the rose, her complexion had the delicacy of the lily, and her breath the sweetness of jessamine. Her hair was golden, and in her voice and glance there was something so enchanting that none could help listening to her or looking at her.

The princess lived for seventeen years in her own rooms, rejoicing the heart of her parents, teachers, and servants. No one else ever saw her, for the sons of the king and all other princes were forbidden to enter her rooms. She never went anywhere, never looked upon the outside world, and never breathed the outer air, but she was perfectly happy.

When she was eighteen it happened, either by chance or by the will of fate, that she heard the cry of the cuckoo. This sound made her strangely uneasy; her golden head drooped, and covering her eyes with her hands, she fell into thought so deep as not to hear her mother enter. The queen looked at her anxiously, and after comforting her went to tell the king about it.

For many years past the sons of kings and neighbouring princes had, either personally or by their ambassadors, presented themselves at court to ask the king for the hand of his daughter in marriage. But he had always bidden them wait until another time. Now, after a long consultation with the queen, he sent messengers to foreign courts and elsewhere to proclaim that the princess, in accordance with the wishes of her parents, was about to choose a husband, and that the man of her choice would also have the right of succession to the throne.

When the princess heard of this decision her joy was very great, and for days she would dream about it. Then she looked out into the garden through the golden lattice of her window, and longed with an irresistible longing to walk in the open air upon the smooth lawn. With great difficulty she at last persuaded her governesses to allow her to do so, they agreeing on condition that she should keep with them. So the crystal doors were thrown open, the oaken gates that shut in the orchard turned on their hinges, and the princess found herself on the green grass. She ran about, picking the sweet-scented flowers and chasing the many-coloured butterflies. But she could not have been a very prudent maiden, for she wandered away from her governesses, with her face uncovered.

Just at that moment a raging hurricane, such as had never been seen or heard before, passed by and fell upon the garden. It roared and whistled round and round, then seizing the princess carried her far away. The terrified governesses wrung their hands, and were for a time speechless with grief. At last they rushed into the palace, and throwing themselves on their knees before the king and queen, told them with sobs and tears what had happened. They were overwhelmed with sorrow and knew not what to do.

By this time quite a crowd of princes had arrived at the palace, and seeing the king in such bitter grief, inquired the reason of it.

“Sorrow has touched my white hairs,” said the king. “The hurricane has carried off my dearly beloved child, the sweet Princess with the Golden Hair, and I know not where it has taken her. Whoever finds this out, and brings her back to me, shall have her for his wife, and with her half my kingdom for a wedding present, and the remainder of my wealth and titles after my death.”

After hearing these words, princes and knights mounted their horses and set off to search throughout the

world for the beautiful Princess with the Golden Hair, who had been carried away by Vikher.

Now among the seekers were two brothers, sons of a king, and they travelled together through many countries asking for news of the princess, but no one knew anything about her. But they continued their search, and at the end of two years arrived in a country that lies in the centre of the earth, and has summer and winter at the same time.

The princes determined to find out whether this was the place where the hurricane had hidden the Princess with the Golden Hair. So they began to ascend one of the mountains on foot, leaving their horses behind them to feed on the grass. On reaching the top, they came in sight of a silver palace supported on a cock's foot, while at one of the windows the sun's rays shone upon a head of golden hair; surely it could only belong to the princess. Suddenly the north wind blew so violently, and the cold became so intense, that the leaves of the trees withered and the breath froze. The two princes tried to keep their footing, and battled manfully against the storm, but they were overcome by its fierceness and fell together, frozen to death.

Their broken-hearted parents waited for them in vain. Masses were said, charities distributed, and prayers sent up to God to pity them in their sorrow.

One day when the queen, the mother of the princes, was giving a poor old man some money she said to him, "My good old friend, pray God to guard our sons and soon bring them back in good health."

"Ah, noble lady," answered he, "that prayer would be useless. Everlasting rest is all one may ask for the dead, but in return for the love you have shown and the money you have given the poor and needy, I am charged with this message—that God has taken pity on your sorrow, and that ere long you will be the mother of a son, the like of whom has never yet been seen."

The old man, having spoken thus, vanished.

The queen, whose tears were falling, felt a strange joy enter her heart and a feeling of happiness steal over her, as she went to the king and repeated the old man's words. And so it came to pass, for a week or two later God sent her a son, and he was in no way like an ordinary child. His eyes resembled those of a falcon, and his eyebrows the sable's fur. His right hand was of pure gold, and his manner and appearance were so full of an indescribable majesty, that he was looked upon by every one with a feeling of awe.

His growth, too, was not like that of other children. When but three days old, he stepped out of his swaddling-clothes and left his cradle. And he was so strong that when his parents entered the room he ran towards them, crying out, "Good morning, dear parents, why are you so sad? Are you not happy at the sight of me?"

"We are indeed happy, dear child, and we thank God for having sent us you in our great grief. But we cannot forget your two brothers; they were so handsome and brave, and worthy of a great destiny. And our sadness is increased when we remember that, instead of resting in their own country in the tomb of their forefathers, they sleep in an unknown land, perhaps without burial. Alas! it is three years since we had news of them."

At these words the child's tears fell, and he embraced his parents and said, "Weep no more, dear parents, you shall soon be comforted: for before next spring I shall be a strong young man, and will look for my brothers all over the world. And I will bring them back to you, if not alive, yet dead: ay, though I have to seek them in the very centre of the earth."

At these words and at that which followed the king and queen were amazed. For the strange child, guided as it were by an invisible hand, rushed into the garden, and in spite of the cold, for it was not yet daylight, bathed in the early dew. When the sun had risen he threw himself down near a little wood on the fine sand, rubbed and rolled himself in it, and returned home, no longer a child but a youth.

It was pleasant to the king to see his son thrive in this way, and indeed the young prince was the handsomest in the whole land. He grew from hour to hour. At the end of a month he could wield a sword, in two months he rode on horseback, in three months he had grown a beautiful moustache of pure gold. Then he put on a helmet, and presenting himself before the king and queen, said: "My much honoured parents, your son asks your blessing. I am no longer a child, and now go to seek my brothers. In order to find them I will, if necessary, go to the furthest ends of the world."

"Ah, do not venture. Stay rather with us, dear son, you are still too young to be exposed to the risks of such an undertaking."

"Adventures have no terrors for me," replied the young hero, "I trust in God. Why should I for a moment hesitate to face these dangers? Whatever Destiny has in store for us will happen, whatever we may do to try to prevent it."

So they agreed to let him go. Weeping they bade him farewell, blessing him and the road he was to travel.

A pleasant tale is soon told, but events do not pass so quickly.

The young prince crossed deep rivers and climbed high mountains, till he came to a dark forest. In the distance he saw a cottage supported on a cock's foot, and standing in the midst of a field full of poppies. As he made his way towards it he was suddenly seized by an overpowering longing to sleep, but he urged on his horse, and breaking off the poppy heads as he galloped through the field, came up close to the house. Then he called out:

"Little cot, turn around, on thy foot turn thou free;

To the forest set thy back, let thy door be wide to me."

The cottage turned round with a great creaking noise, the door facing the prince. He entered, and found an old woman with thin white hair and a face covered with wrinkles, truly frightful to look upon. She was sitting at a table, her head resting on her hands, her eyes fixed on the ceiling, lost in deep thought. Near her were two beautiful girls, their complexions like lilies and roses, and in every way sweet to the eye.

"Ah, how do you do, Prince with Moustache of Gold, Hero with the Golden Fist?" said old Yaga; "what has

brought you here?”

Having told her the object of his journey, she replied, “Your elder brothers perished on the mountain that touches the clouds, while in search of the Princess with the Golden Hair, who was carried off by Vikher, the hurricane.”

“And how is this thief Vikher to be got at?” asked the prince.

“Ah, my dear child, he would swallow you like a fly. It is now a hundred years since I went outside this cottage, for fear Vikher should seize me and carry me off to his palace near the sky.”

“I am not afraid of his carrying me off, I am not handsome enough for that; and he will not swallow me either, for my golden hand can smash anything.”

“Then if you are not afraid, my dove, I will help you to the best of my power. But give me your word of honour that you will bring me some of the Water of Youth, for it restores even to the most aged the beauty and freshness of youth.”

“I give you my word of honour that I will bring you some.”

“This then is what you must do. I will give you a pin-cushion for a guide; this you throw in front of you, and follow whithersoever it goes. It will lead you to the mountain that touches the clouds, and which is guarded in Vikher’s absence by his father and mother, the northern blast and the south wind. On no account lose sight of the pin-cushion. If attacked by the father, the northern blast, and suddenly seized with cold, then put on this heat-giving hood: if overpowered by burning heat of the south wind, then drink from this cooling flagon. Thus by means of the pin-cushion, the hood, and the flagon, you will reach the top of the mountain where the Princess with the Golden Hair is imprisoned. Deal with Vikher as you will, only remember to bring me some of the Water of Youth.”

Our young hero took the heat-giving hood, the cooling flagon, and the pin-cushion, and, after bidding farewell to old Yaga and her two pretty daughters, mounted his steed and rode off, following the pin-cushion, which rolled before him at a great rate.

Now a beautiful story is soon told, but the events of which it consists do not in real life take place so rapidly.

When the prince had travelled through two kingdoms, he came to a land in which lay a very beautiful valley that stretched into the far distance, and above it towered the mountain that touches the sky. The summit was so high above the earth you might almost fancy it reached the moon.

The prince dismounted, left his horse to graze, and having crossed himself began to follow the pin-cushion up steep and rocky paths. When he had got half-way there the north wind began to blow, and the cold was so intense that the wood of the trees split up and the breath froze: he felt chilled to the heart. But he quickly put on the heat-giving hood, and cried:

“O Heat-Giving Hood, see I fly now to thee,

Lend me quickly thine aid;

O hasten to warm ere the cold has killed me,

With thee I'm not afraid.”

The northern blast blew with redoubled fury, but to no purpose. For the prince was so hot that he streamed with perspiration, and indeed was obliged to unbutton his coat and fan himself.

Here the pin-cushion stopped upon a small snow-covered mound. The prince cleared away the snow, beneath which lay the frozen bodies of two young men, and he knew them to be those of his lost brothers. Having knelt beside them and prayed he turned to follow the pin-cushion, which had already started, and was rolling ever higher and higher. On reaching the top of the mountain he saw a silver palace supported on a cock's foot, and at one of the windows, shining in the sun's rays, a head of golden hair which could belong to no one but the princess. Suddenly a hot wind began to blow from the south, and the heat became so intense that leaves withered and dropped from the trees, the grass dried up, and large cracks appeared in several places of the earth's surface. Thirst, heat, and weariness began to tell upon the young prince, so he took the cooling flagon from his pocket and cried:

“Flagon, bring me quick relief

From this parching heat;

In thy draught I have belief,

Coolness it will mete.”

After drinking deeply he felt stronger than ever, and so continued to ascend. Not only was he relieved from the great heat, but was even obliged to button up his coat to keep himself warm.

The pin-cushion still led the way, ever climbing higher and higher, while the prince followed close behind. After crossing the region of clouds they came to the topmost peak of the mountain. Here the prince came close to the palace, which can only be likened to a dream of perfect beauty. It was supported on a cock’s foot, and was built entirely of silver, except for its steel gates and roof of solid gold. Before the entrance was a deep precipice over which none but the birds could pass. As the prince gazed upon the splendid building the princess leaned out of one of the windows, and seeing him light shone from her sparkling eyes, her lovely hair floated in the wind, and the scent of her sweet breath filled the air. The prince sprang forward and cried out:

“Silver Palace, oh turn, on thy foot turn thou free,

To the steep rocks thy back, but thy doors wide to me.”

At these words it revolved creaking, the doorway facing the prince. As he entered it returned to its original position. The prince went through the palace till he came to a room bright as the sun itself, and the walls, floor, and ceiling of which consisted of mirrors. He was filled with wonder, for instead of one princess he saw twelve, all equally beautiful, with the same graceful movements and golden hair. But eleven were only reflections of the one real princess. She gave a cry of joy on seeing him, and running to meet him, said: “Ah, noble sir, you look like a delivering angel. Surely you bring me good news. From what family, city, or country have you come? Perhaps my dear father and mother sent you in search of me?”

“No one has sent me, I have come of my own free will to rescue you and restore you to your parents.”

When he had told her all that had passed she said, “Your devotion, prince, is very great; may God bless your

attempt. But Vikher the hurricane is unconquerable, so, if life be dear to you, fly. Leave this place before his return, which I expect every minute; he will kill you with one glance of his eyes.”

“If I should not succeed in saving you, sweet princess, life can be no longer dear to me. But I am full of hope, and I beg you first to give me some of the Strength-Giving Water from the Heroic Well, for this is drunk by the hurricane.”

The princess drew a bucketful of water, which the young man emptied at one draught and then asked for another. This astonished her somewhat, but she gave it him, and when he had drunk it he said, “Allow me, princess, to sit down for a moment to take breath.”

She gave him an iron chair, but directly he sat down it broke into a thousand pieces. She then brought him the chair used by Vikher himself, but although it was made of the strongest steel, it bent and creaked beneath the prince’s weight.

“Now you see,” said he, “that I have grown heavier than your unconquerable hurricane: so take courage, with God’s help and your good wishes I shall overcome him. In the meantime tell me how you pass your time here.”

“Alas! in bitter tears and sad reflections. My only consolation is that I have been able to keep my persecutor at a distance, for he vainly implores me to marry him. Two years have now passed away, and yet none of his efforts to win my consent have been successful. Last time he went away he told me that if on his return he had not guessed the riddles I set him (the correct explanation of these being the condition I have made for his marrying me), he would set them aside, and marry me in spite of my objections.”

“Ah, then I am just in time. I will be the priest on that occasion, and give him Death for a bride.”

At that moment a horrible whistling was heard.

“Be on your guard, prince,” cried she, “here comes the hurricane.”

The palace spun rapidly round, fearful sounds filled the building, thousands of ravens and birds of ill omen croaked loudly and flapped their wings, and all the doors opened with a tremendous noise.

Vikher, mounted on his winged horse that breathed fire, leapt into the mirrored room, then stopped amazed at

the sight before him. He was indeed the hurricane, with the body of a giant and the head of a dragon, and as he gazed his horse pranced and beat his wings.

“What is your business here, stranger?” he shouted: and the sound of his voice was like unto a lion’s roar.

“I am your enemy, and I want your blood,” replied the prince calmly.

“Your boldness amuses me. At the same time, if you do not depart at once I will take you in my left hand and crush every bone in your body with my right.”

“Try, if you dare, woman-stealer,” he answered.

Vikher roared, breathing fire in his rage, and with his mouth wide open threw himself upon the prince, intending to swallow him. But the latter stepped lightly aside, and putting his golden hand down his enemy’s throat, seized him by the tongue and dashed him against the wall with such force that the monster bounded against it like a ball, and died within a few moments, shedding torrents of blood.

The prince then drew from different springs the water that restores, that revives, and that makes young, and taking the unconscious girl in his arms he led the winged horse to the door and said:

“Silver Palace, oh turn, on thy foot turn thou free,

To the steep rocks thy back, the courtyard may I see.”

Whereupon the palace creaked round on the cock’s foot, and the door opened on the courtyard. Mounting the horse he placed the princess before him, for she had by this time recovered from her swoon, and cried:

“Fiery Horse with strength of wing,

I am now your lord;

Do my will in everything,

Be your law my word.

Where I point there you must go

At once, at once. The way you know.”

And he pointed to the place where his brothers lay frozen in death. The horse rose, pranced, beat the air with his wings, then, lifting himself high in the air, came down gently where the two princes were lying. The Prince with the Golden Hand sprinkled their bodies with the Life-Restoring Water, and instantly the pallor of death disappeared, leaving in its place the natural colour. He then sprinkled them with the Water that Revives, after which they opened their eyes, got up, and looking round said, “How well we have slept: but what has happened? And how is it we see the lovely princess we sought in the society of a young man, a perfect stranger to us?”

The Prince with the Golden Hand explained everything, embraced his brothers tenderly, and taking them with him on his horse, showed the latter that he wished to go in the direction of Yaga’s cottage. The horse rose up, pranced, lifted himself in the air, then, beating his wings far above the highest forests, descended close by the cottage. The prince said:

“Little cot, turn around, on thy foot turn thou free,

To the forest thy back, but thy door wide to me.”

The cottage began to creak without delay, and turned round with the floor facing the travellers. Old Yaga was on the look-out, and came to meet them. As soon as she got the Water of Youth she sprinkled herself with it, and instantly everything about her that was old and ugly became young and charming. So pleased was she to be young again that she kissed the prince’s hands and said, “Ask of me anything you like, I will refuse you nothing.”

At that moment her two beautiful young daughters happened to look out of the window, upon which the two elder princes, who were admiring them, said, “Will you give us your daughters for wives?”

“That I will, with pleasure,” said she, and beckoned them to her. Then curtsying to her future sons-in-law, she laughed merrily and vanished. They placed their brides before them on the same horse, while the Prince with the Golden Hand, pointing to where he wished to go, said:

“Fiery Horse with strength of wing,

I am now your lord;

Do my will in everything,

Be your law my word.

Where I point there you must go

At once, at once. The way you know.”

The horse rose up, pranced, flapped his wings, and flew far above the forest. An hour or two later he descended before the palace of the Golden-Haired Princess’s parents. When the king and queen saw their only daughter who had so long been lost to them, they ran to meet her with exclamations of joy and kissed her gratefully and lovingly, at the same time thanking the prince who had restored her to them. And when they heard the story of his adventures they said: “You, Prince with the Golden Hand, shall receive our beloved daughter in marriage, with the half of our kingdom, and the right of succession to the remainder after us. Let us, too, add to the joy of this day by celebrating the weddings of your two brothers.”

The Princess with the Golden Hair kissed her father lovingly and said, “My much honoured and noble sire and lord, the prince my bridegroom knows of the vow I made when carried off by the hurricane, that I would only give my hand to him who could answer aright my six enigmas: it would be impossible for the Princess with the Golden Hair to break her word.”

The king was silent, but the prince said, “Speak, sweet princess, I am listening.”

“This is my first riddle: “Two of my extremities form a sharp point, the two others a ring, in my centre is a screw.””

“A pair of scissors,” answered he.

“Well guessed. This is the second: ‘I make the round of the table on only one foot, but if I am wounded the evil is beyond repair.’”

“A glass of wine.”

“Right. This is the third: ‘I have no tongue, and yet I answer faithfully; I am not seen, yet every one hears me.’”

“An echo.”

“True. This is the fourth: ‘Fire cannot light me; brush cannot sweep me; no painter can paint me; no hiding-place secure me.’”

“Sunshine.”

“The very thing. This is the fifth: ‘I existed before the creation of Adam. I am always changing in succession the two colours of my dress. Thousands of years have gone by, but I have remained unaltered both in colour and form.’”

“It must be time, including day and night.”

“You have succeeded in guessing the five most difficult, the last is the easiest of all. ‘By day a ring, by night a serpent; he who guesses this shall be my bridegroom.’”

“It is a girdle.”

“Now they are all guessed,” said she, and gave her hand to the young prince.

They knelt before the king and queen to receive their blessing. The three weddings were celebrated that same evening, and a messenger mounted the winged horse to carry the good news to the parents of the young princes and to bring them back as guests. Meanwhile a magnificent feast was prepared, and invitations were sent to all their friends and acquaintances. And from that evening until the next morning they ceased not to feast and drink and dance. I too was a guest, and feasted with the rest; but though I ate and drank, the wine only ran down my beard, and my throat remained dry.

Read more fairy tales on Fairytalez.com