

The Sluggard

Fairy Tales Of The Slav Peasants And Herdsmen

Slavic

Intermediate

11 min read

On the banks of a certain river, where there was always good fishing, lived an old man and his three sons. The two eldest were sharp-witted, active young men, already married; the youngest was stupid and idle, and a bachelor. When the father was dying, he called his children to him and told them how he had left his property. The house was for his two married sons, with a sum of three hundred florins each. After his death he was buried with great pomp, and after the funeral there was a splendid feast. All these honours were supposed to be for the benefit of the man's soul.

When the elder brothers took possession of their inheritance, they said to the youngest: "Listen, brother; let us take charge of your share of the money, for we intend going out into the world as merchants, and when we have made a great deal of money we will buy you a hat, a sash, and a pair of red boots. You will be better at home; and mind you do as your sisters-in-law tell you."

For a long time this silly fellow had been wanting a cap, a sash, and a pair of red boots, so he was easily persuaded to give up all his money.

The brothers set out on their travels, and crossed the sea in search of fortune. The “fool” of the family remained at home; and, as he was an out-and-out sluggard, he would lie whole days at a time on the warm stove without doing a stroke of work, and only obeying his sisters-in-law with the greatest reluctance. He liked fried onions, potato soup, and cider, better than anything else in the world.

One day his sisters-in-law asked him to fetch them some water.

It was winter, and a hard frost; moreover, the sluggard did not feel at all inclined to go out. So he said, “Go yourselves, I prefer to stay here by the fire.”

“Stupid boy, go at once. We will have some onions, potato soup, and cider ready for you when you come back. If you refuse to do what we ask you we shall tell our husbands, and then there will be neither cap, sash, nor red boots for you.”

At these words the sluggard thought he had better go. So he rolled off the stove, took a hatchet and a couple of pails, and went down to the river. On the surface of the water, where the ice had been broken, was a large pike. The sluggard seized him by the fins and pulled him out.

“If you will let me go,” said the pike, “I promise to give you everything you wish for.”

“Well then, I should like all my desires to be fulfilled the moment I utter them.”

“You shall have everything you want the moment you pronounce these words:

‘At my behest, and by the orders of the pike,

May such and such things happen, as I like.’”

“Just wait one moment while I try the effect,” said the sluggard, and began at once to say:

“At my behest, and by the orders of the pike,

Bring onions, cider, soup, just as I like.”

That very moment his favourite dishes were before him. Having eaten a large quantity, he said, “Very good, very good indeed; but will it always be the same?”

“Always,” replied the pike.

The sluggard put the pike back into the river, and turning towards his buckets, said:

“At my behest, and by the orders of the pike,

Walk home yourselves, my pails—that I should like.”

The pails, and the strong rod to which they were fastened, immediately set off and walked solemnly along, the sluggard following them with his hands in his pockets. When they reached the house he put them in their places, and again stretched himself out to enjoy the warmth of the stove. Presently the sisters-in-law said, “Come and chop some wood for us.”

“Bother! do it yourselves.”

“It is not fit work for women. Besides, if you don’t do it the stove will be cold, and then you will be the chief sufferer. Moreover, pay attention to what we say, for if you do not obey us, there will be no red boots, nor any other pretty things.”

The sluggard then just sat up and said:

“At my behest, and by the orders of the pike,

Let what my sisters want be done—that’s what I like.”

Instantly the hatchet came out from behind a stool and chopped up a large heap of wood, put a part of it on the stove, and retired to its corner. All this time the sluggard was eating and drinking at his ease.

Another day some wood had to be brought from the forest. Our sluggard now thought he would like to show off before the villagers, so he pulled a sledge out of the shed, loaded it with onions and soup, after which he pronounced the magic words.

The sledge started off, and passing through the village at a rattling pace, ran over several people, and frightened the women and children.

When the forest was reached, our friend looked on while the blocks of wood and faggots cut, tied, and laid themselves on the sledge, after which they set off home again. But when they got to the middle of the village

the men, who had been hurt and frightened in the morning, seized hold of the sluggard and pulled him off the sledge, dragging him along by the hair to give him a sound thrashing.

At first he thought it was only a joke, but when the blows hurt his shoulders, he said:

“At my behest, and by the orders of the pike,

Come, faggots, haste, and my assailants strike.”

In a moment all the blocks of wood and faggots jumped off the sledge and began to hit right and left, and they hit so well that the men were glad to get out of the way as best they could.

The sluggard laughed at them till his sides ached; then he remounted his sledge, and was soon lying on the stove again.

From that day he became famous, and his doings were talked about all through the country.

At last even the king heard of him, and, his curiosity being aroused, he sent some of his soldiers to fetch him.

“Now then, booby,” said the soldier, “come down off that stove and follow me to the king’s palace.”

“Why should I? There is as much cider, onions, and soup as I want at home.”

The man, indignant at his want of respect, struck him.

Upon which the sluggard said:

“At my behest, and by the orders of the pike,

May this man get a taste of what a broom is like.”

A large broom, and not particularly clean, immediately hopped up, and first dipping itself in a pail of water, beat the soldier so mercilessly that he was obliged to escape through the window, whence he returned to the king. His majesty, amazed at the sluggard’s refusal, sent another messenger. This man was ’cuter than his comrade, and first made inquiries as to the sluggard’s tastes. Then he went up to him and said, “Good-day, my friend; will you come with me to see the king? He wishes to present you with a cap, a waistband, and a pair of red boots.”

“With the greatest pleasure; you go on, I will soon overtake you.”

Then he ate as much as he could of his favourite dishes and went to sleep on the stove. He slept so long that at last his sisters-in-law woke him up and told him he would be late if he did not at once go to see the king. The lazy fellow said nothing but these words:

“At my behest, and by the orders of the pike,

This stove to carry me before the king I'd like.”

At the very same instant the stove moved from its place and carried him right up to the palace door. The king was filled with amazement, and running out, followed by the whole court, asked the sluggard what he would like to have.

“I have merely come to fetch the hat, waistband, and red boots you promised me.”

Just then the charming princess Gapiomila came to find out what was going on. Directly the sluggard saw her, he thought her so enchanting that he whispered to himself:

“At my behest, and by the orders of the pike,

That this princess so fair may love me, I should like.”

Then he ordered his stove to take him back home, and when there he continued to eat onions and soup and to drink cider.

Meanwhile the princess had fallen in love with him, and begged her father to send for him again. As the sluggard would not consent, the king had him bound when asleep, and thus brought to the palace. Then he summoned a celebrated magician, who at his orders shut the princess and sluggard up in a crystal cask, to which was fastened a balloon well filled with gas, and sent it up in the air among the clouds. The princess wept bitterly, but the fool sat still and said he felt very comfortable. At last she persuaded him to exert his powers, so he said:

“At my behest, and by the orders of the pike,

This cask of crystal earth at once must strike

Upon the friendly island I should like.”

The crystal cask immediately descended, and opened upon a hospitable island where travellers could have all they wanted by simply wishing for it. The princess and her companion walked about, eating when hungry, and drinking when athirst. The sluggard was very happy and contented, but the lady begged him to wish for a palace. Instantly the palace made its appearance. It was built of white marble, with crystal windows, roof of yellow amber, and golden furniture. She was delighted with it. Next day she wanted a good road made, along which she could go to see her father. Immediately there stretched before them a fairy-like bridge made of crystal, having golden balustrades set with diamonds, and leading right up to the king’s palace. The sluggard was just about to accompany the princess when he began to think of his own appearance, and to feel ashamed that such an awkward, stupid fellow as he should walk by the side of such a lovely and graceful creature. So he said:

“At my behest, and by the orders of the pike,

To be both handsome, wise, and clever I should like.”

Suddenly he became as handsome, wise, and clever as it was possible to be. Then he got into a gorgeous carriage with Gapiomila, and they drove across the bridge that led to the king’s palace.

There they were received with every mark of joy and affection. The king gave them his blessing, and they were married the same evening. An immense number of guests were invited to the wedding feast; I, too, was there, and drank freely of wine and hydromel. And this is the story I have done my best to tell you as faithfully as possible.

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