

*The Story of the Plentiful
Tablecloth, the Avenging
Wand, the Sash that Becomes
a Lake and the Terrible
Helmet*

Fairy Tales Of The Slav Peasants And Herdsmen

Slavic

*Intermediate
26 min read*

Now it once happened that one of the king's herdsmen had three sons. Two of these lads were supposed to be very sharp-witted, while the youngest was thought to be very stupid indeed. The elder sons helped their father to look after the flocks and herds, while the fool, so they called him, was good for nothing but sleeping and amusing himself.

He would pass whole days and nights slumbering peacefully on the stove, only getting off when forced to by

others, or when he was too warm and wished to lie on the other side, or when, hungry and thirsty, he wanted food and drink.

His father had no love for him, and called him a ne'er-do-well. His brothers often tormented him by dragging him off the stove, and taking away his food—indeed, he would many a time have gone hungry if his mother had not been good to him and fed him on the quiet. She caressed him fondly, for why should he suffer, thought she, if he does happen to have been born a fool? Besides, who can understand the ways of God? It sometimes happens that the wisest men are not happy, while the foolish, when harmless and gentle, lead contented lives.

One day, on their return from the fields, the fool's two brothers dragged him off the stove, and taking him into the yard, where they gave him a sound thrashing, they turned him out of the house, saying, "Go, fool, and lose no time, for you shall have neither food nor lodging until you bring us a basket of mushrooms from the wood."

The poor lad was so taken by surprise he hardly understood what his brothers wanted him to do. After pondering for a while he made his way towards a small oak forest, where everything seemed to have a strange and marvellous appearance, so strange that he did not recognise the place. As he walked he came to a small dead tree-stump, on the top of which he placed his cap, saying, "Every tree here raises its head to the skies and wears a good cap of leaves, but you, my poor friend, are bare-headed; you will die of cold. You must be among your brothers, as I am among mine—a born fool. Take then my cap." And, throwing his arms round the dead stump, he wept and embraced it tenderly. At that moment an oak which stood near began to walk towards him as if it were alive. The poor fellow was frightened, and about to run away, but the oak spake like a human being and said, "Do not fly; stop a moment and listen to me. This withered tree is my son, and up to this time no one has grieved for his dead youth but me. You have now watered him with your tears, and in return for your sympathy you shall henceforward have anything you ask of me, on pronouncing these words:

"O Oak Tree so green, and with acorns of gold,

Your friendship to prove I will try;

In Heaven's good name now to beg I'll make bold,

My needs, then, oh kindly supply."

At the same moment a shower of golden acorns fell. The fool filled his pockets, thanked the oak, and bowing to her returned home.

“Well, stupid, where are the mushrooms?” cried one of his brothers.

“I have some mushrooms off the oak in my pockets.”

“Eat them yourself then, for you will get nothing else, you good-for-nothing. What have you done with your cap?”

“I put it on a poor stump of a tree that stood by the wayside, for its head was uncovered, and I was afraid it might freeze.”

He then scrambled on to the top of the stove, and as he lay down some of the golden acorns fell out of his pocket. So bright were they, they shone like sunbeams in the room. In spite of the fool’s entreaties the brothers picked them up and gave them to their father, who hastened to present them to the king, telling him that his idiot son had gathered them in the wood. The king immediately sent a detachment of his guards to the forest to find the oak which bore golden acorns. But their efforts were fruitless, for, though they hunted in every nook and corner of the forest, they found not a single oak that bore acorns of gold.

At first the king was very angry, but when he grew calmer he sent for his herdsman and said to him, “Tell your son, the fool, that he must bring me, by this evening, a cask filled to the brim with these precious golden acorns. If he obeys my commands you shall never lack bread and salt, and you may rest assured that my royal favour will not fail you in time of need.”

The herdsman gave his youngest son the king’s message.

“The king, I see,” he replied, “is fond of a good bargain; he does not ask, he commands—and insists upon a fool fetching him acorns of solid gold in return for promises made of air. No, I shall not go.”

And neither prayers nor threats were of the slightest avail to make him change his mind. At last his brothers pulled him forcibly off the stove, put his coat on him and a new cap, and dragged him into the yard, where they gave him a good beating and drove him away, saying, “Now, you stupid, lose no time; be off, and be quick. If

you return without the golden acorns you shall have neither supper nor bed.”

What was the poor fellow to do? For a long time he wept, then crossing himself he went in the direction of the forest. He soon reached the dead stump, upon which his cap still rested, and going up to the mother oak, said to her:

“O Oak Tree so green, and with acorns of gold,

In my helplessness I to thee cry;

In Heaven’s great name now to beg I make bold,

My pressing needs pray satisfy.”

The oak moved, and shook its branches: but instead of golden acorns, a tablecloth fell into the fool’s hands. And the tree said, “Keep this cloth always in your possession, and for your own use. When you want a benefit by it, you need only say:

“O Tablecloth, who for the poor,

The hungry, and thirsty, makes cheer,

May he who begs from door to door

Feed off you without stint or fear.”

When it had uttered these words the oak ceased to speak, and the fool, thanking her, bowed, and turned towards home. On his way he wondered to himself how he should tell his brothers, and what they would say, but above all he thought how his good mother would rejoice to see the feast-giving tablecloth. When he had walked about half the distance he met an old beggar who said to him, “See what a sick and ragged old man I am: for the love of God give me a little money or some bread.”

The fool spread his tablecloth on the grass, and inviting the beggar to sit down, said:

“O Tablecloth, who for the poor,

The hungry, and thirsty, makes cheer,

May he who begs from door to door

Feed off you without stint or fear.”

Then a whistling was heard in the air, and overhead something shone brightly. At the same instant a table, spread as for a royal banquet, appeared before them. Upon it were many different kinds of food, flasks of mead, and glasses of the choicest wine. The plate was of gold and silver.

The fool and the beggar man crossed themselves and began to feast. When they had finished the whistling was again heard, and everything vanished. The fool folded up his tablecloth and went on his way. But the old man said, “If you will give me your tablecloth you shall have this wand in exchange. When you say certain words to it, it will set upon the person or persons pointed out, and give them such a thrashing, that to get rid of it they will give you anything they possess.”

The fool thought of his brothers and exchanged the tablecloth for the wand, after which they both went on their respective ways.

Suddenly the fool remembered that the oak had ordered him to keep the tablecloth for his own use, and that by parting with it he had lost the power of giving his mother an agreeable surprise. So he said to the wand:

“Thou self-propelling, ever willing, fighting Wand,

Run quick and bring

My feast-providing tablecloth back to my hand,

Thy praise I'll sing.”

The wand went off like an arrow after the old man, quickly overtook him, and throwing itself upon him began to beat him dreadfully, crying out in a loud voice:

“For others' goods you seem to have a liking,

Stop, thief, or sure your back I'll keep on striking.”

The poor beggar tried to run away, but it was of no use, for the wand followed him, striking all the time and repeating the same words over and over again. So in spite of his anxiety to keep the tablecloth he was forced to throw it away and flee.

The wand brought the cloth back to the fool, who again went on his way towards home, thinking of the surprise in store for his mother and brothers. He had not gone very far when a traveller, carrying an empty wallet, accosted him, saying, “For the love of God, give me a small coin or a morsel of food, for my bag is empty and I am very hungry. I have, too, a long journey before me.”

The fool again spread his tablecloth on the grass and said:

“O Tablecloth, who for the poor,

The hungry, and thirsty, makes cheer,

May he who begs from door to door

Feed off you without stint or fear.”

A whistling was heard in the air, something shone brightly overhead, and a table, spread as for a royal feast, placed itself before them. It was laid with a numerous variety of dishes, hydromel and costly wines. The fool and his guest sat down, crossed themselves, and ate to their hearts' content. When they had finished whistling was again heard, and everything vanished. The fool folded the cloth up carefully, and was about to continue his journey when the traveller said, “Will you exchange your tablecloth for my waistband? When you say to it certain words it will turn into a deep lake, upon which you may float at will. The words run thus:

“O marvellous, wonderful, lake-forming Band,

For my safety, and not for my fun,

Bear me in a boat on thy waves far from land,

So that I from my foes need not run.”

The fool thought his father would find it very convenient always to have water at hand for the king's flocks, so he gave his tablecloth in exchange for the belt, which he wound round his loins, and taking the wand in his hand, they went off in opposite directions. After a little while the fool began to reflect on what the oak had told him about keeping the tablecloth for his own use, and he remembered, too, that he was depriving himself of the power of giving his mother a pleasant surprise. Thereupon he said the magic words to his wand:

“Thou self-propelling, ever willing, fighting Wand,

Run quick and bring

My feast-providing tablecloth back to my hand,

Thy praise I'll sing.”

The wand at once started in pursuit of the poor traveller, whom it began to beat, at the same time crying out:

“For others' goods you seem to have a liking,

Stop, thief, or sure your back I'll keep on striking.”

The man was scared out of his wits, and tried to escape the wand's blows, but it was of no use, so he was forced to throw the tablecloth away and run at the top of his speed. The wand brought the tablecloth back to his master. The latter hid it under his coat, rearranged the waistband, and taking the faithful wand in his hand, again went towards home. As he walked he rejoiced to think of the pleasure he should have in exercising the wand on his wicked brothers, of his father's satisfaction when, by the help of the waistband, he could always have water for the king's flocks, even in the driest weather, and of his mother's joy on witnessing the wonders of the feast-giving tablecloth. These pleasant thoughts were interrupted by a soldier, lame, clothed in rags, and covered with wounds. He had once been a famous warrior.

“I am pursued by misfortunes,” said he to the fool. “I was once a brave soldier, and fought valiantly in my youth. Now I am lamed for life, and on this lonely road have found no one to give me a morsel of food. Have pity on me and give me a little bread.”

The fool sat down on the grass, and spreading out his tablecloth, said:

“O Tablecloth, who for the poor,

The hungry, and thirsty, makes cheer,

May he who begs from door to door

Feed off you without stint or fear.”

A whistling was heard in the air, something bright shone overhead, and then before them stood a table, spread as for a royal feast, loaded with dainty dishes, mead, and costly wines. When they had eaten and drunk as much as they wanted the whistling was again heard, and then everything vanished.

The fool was folding up his tablecloth, when the soldier said:

“Will you give me your tablecloth in exchange for this six-horned helmet? It will fire itself off and instantly destroy the object pointed out. You have but to turn it round on your head and repeat these words:

“O Magic Helmet, never thou

Dost want for powder nor shot;

Allay my fears and fire now

Just where I point. Fail not.’

You will see that it fires off immediately: and even if your enemy were a mile away he would fall.”

The fool was delighted with the idea, and thought how useful such a hat would be in any sudden danger; it would even serve him to defend his country, the king, or himself. So he handed the tablecloth to the soldier, put the helmet on his head, took his wand in his hand, and again set his face towards home.

When he had gone some distance, and the soldier was almost out of sight, he began to think of what the oak had said about not parting with the tablecloth, and of how his dear mother could not now enjoy the pleasant surprise he had been dreaming about. So he said to the wand:

“Thou self-propelling, ever willing, fighting Wand,

Run quick, and bring

My feast-providing tablecloth back to my hand,

Thy praise I'll sing.”

The wand dashed after the soldier, and having reached him began to beat him, crying out:

“For others' goods you seem to have a liking,

Stop, thief, or sure your back I'll keep on striking.”

The soldier was still a powerful man, and in spite of his wound turned right about face, intending to give blow for blow. But the wand was too much for him, and he soon found resistance useless. So, overcome by pain rather than fear, he threw away the tablecloth and took to his heels.

The faithful wand brought the tablecloth back to his master, who, glad to have it again, once more turned towards home.

He soon left the forest, crossed the fields, and came in sight of his father's house. At a little distance therefrom his brothers met him, and said crossly, “Well, stupid, where are the golden acorns?”

The fool looked at them and laughed in their faces. Then he said to his wand:

“O self-propelling, ever willing, fighting Wand

Strike with thy usual fire

My ever-scolding, teasing, worrying brother band,

For they have roused my ire.”

The wand needed no second bidding, and darting out of his hand began to thrash the brothers soundly, crying out like a reasoning creature:

“Your brother has often your blows felt, alack!

Now taste it yourselves; hope you like it, whack, whack.”

The brothers were overpowered, and felt all the while as if boiling water were being poured over their heads. Yelling with pain they began to run at full speed, and soon disappeared with clouds of dust flying round them.

The wand then came back to the fool’s hand. He went into the house, climbed on the stove, and told his mother all that had happened. Then he cried:

“O Tablecloth, who for the poor,

The hungry, and thirsty, makes cheer,

Let us within our cottage door

Feed off you without stint or fear.”

A whistling was heard in the air, something bright shone overhead, and then a table, laid as for a royal banquet, was placed before them, covered with dainty meats, glasses, and bottles of mead and wine. The whole service was of gold and silver. As the fool and his mother were about to begin the feast the herdsman entered. He stopped, dumb with amazement, but when invited to partake, began to eat and drink with great enjoyment.

At the end of the meal the whistling was again heard, and everything vanished completely.

The herdsman set off in hot haste to the court, to tell the king of this new marvel. Thereupon his majesty sent one of his heroes in search of the fool, whom he found stretched on the stove.

“If you value your life, listen, and obey the king’s orders,” said the paladin. “He commands you to send him by me your tablecloth, then you shall have your share of his royal favour. But if not you will always remain a poor fool, and will, moreover, be treated as a refractory prisoner. We teach them how to behave; you understand?”

“Oh yes, I understand.” And then he pronounced the magic words:

“O self-propelling, ever willing, fighting Wand,

Go, soundly thrash that man—

The most deceiving, dangerous wretch in all the land,

So hurt him all you can.”

The wand sprang from the fool’s hand with the speed of lightning and struck the paladin three times in the face. He immediately fled, but the wand was after him, hitting him all the time, and crying out:

“Mere promises are children’s play,

So do not throw your breath away,

But think of something true to say,

You rogue, when next you come our way.”

Defeated and filled with consternation, the paladin returned to the king and told him about the wand, and how badly he had been beaten. When the king heard that the fool possessed a wand that struck of itself, he wanted it so much that for a time he forgot all about the tablecloth, and sent some of his soldiers with orders to bring him back the wand.

When they entered the cottage, the fool, as usual, was lying on the stove.

“Deliver up the wand to us instantly,” said they; “the king is willing to pay any price you ask, but if you refuse he

will take it from you by force.”

Instead of replying the fool unwound the waistband, saying to it as he did so:

“O marvellous, wonderful, lake-forming Band,

For my safety, and not for my fun,

Bear me in a boat on thy waves far from land,

So that I from my foes need not run.”

There was a shimmering in the air, while at the same moment everything around them disappeared, and a beautiful lake, long, wide, and deep, was seen, surrounded by green fields. Fish with golden scales and eyes of pearls played in the clear water. In the centre, in a small silver skiff, rowed a man, whom the soldiers recognised as the fool.

They remained some time looking at this miracle, and then ran off to tell the king. Now when the king heard thereof he was so anxious to possess the lake, or rather the waistband that produced the lake, that he sent a whole battalion of soldiers to take the fool prisoner.

This time they managed to get hold of him while he was asleep, but as they were about to tie his hands he turned his hat round and said:

“O Magic Helmet, never thou

Dost want for powder nor shot,

Allay my fears and fire now

Just where I point. Fail not.”

Instantly a hundred bullets whistled through the air, amid clouds of smoke and loud reports. Many of the soldiers fell dead, others took refuge in the wood, whence they returned to the king to give an account of what had taken place.

Whereupon the king flew into a violent rage, furious that he had as yet failed to take the fool. But his wish to possess the feast-giving tablecloth, the magic wand, the lake-forming sash, and above all the helmet with twenty-four horns, was stronger than ever.

Having reflected for some days on the best ways and means to attain his object, he resolved to try the effect of kindness, and sent for the fool's mother.

"Tell your son, the fool," said his majesty to the woman, "that my charming daughter and I send greeting, and that we shall consider it an honour if he will come here and show us the marvellous things he possesses. Should he feel inclined to make me a present of them, I will give him half my kingdom and will make him my heir. You may also say that the princess, my daughter, will choose him for her husband."

The good woman hastened home to her son, whom she advised to accept the king's invitation and show him his treasures. The fool wound the waistband round his loins, put the helmet on his head, hid the tablecloth in his breast, took his magic wand in his hand, and started off to go to the court.

The king was not there on his arrival, but he was received by the paladin, who saluted him courteously. Music played, and the troops did him military honours—in fact, he was treated far better than he had expected. On being presented to the king he took off his helmet, and bowing low, said: "O king, I am come to lay at the foot of your throne my tablecloth, waistband, wand, and helmet. In return for these gifts I beg that your favour may be shown to the most humble of your subjects."

"Tell me then, fool, what price you want for these goods?"

"Not money, sire, a fool of my sort cares very little about money. Has not the king promised my mother that he will give me in exchange the half of his kingdom, and the hand of his daughter in marriage? These are the gifts I claim."

After these words the paladin was filled with envy at the good fortune of the fool, and made a sign for the guards to enter. The soldiers seized the poor fellow, dragged him out into the courtyard, and they killed him treacherously to the sound of drums and trumpets, after which they covered him over with earth.

Now it happened that when the soldiers stabbed him his blood spurted out, and some of the drops fell beneath

the princess's window. The maiden wept bitterly at the sight, watering the blood-stained ground with her tears. And lo! marvellous to relate, an apple-tree grew out of the blood-sprinkled earth. And it grew so rapidly that its branches soon touched the windows of her rooms; by noon it was covered with blossom, while at eventide ripe red apples hung thereon. As the princess was admiring them she noticed that one of the apples trembled, and when she touched it, it fell into the bosom of her dress. This took her fancy, and she held it in her hand.

Meanwhile the sun had set, night had fallen, and every one in the palace was asleep, except the guard, the paladin, and the princess. The guard, sword in hand, patrolled up and down, for it was his duty. The princess toyed with her pretty little apple, and could not sleep. The paladin, who had gone to bed, was aroused by a sound that made his blood run cold, for the avenging wand stood before him and began to beat him soundly. And although he rushed from the room trying to escape from it, it followed him, crying out:

“False paladin, you worthless man,

Do not so envious be;

Why act unjustly, when you can

Both just and honest be?

For others' goods why have you such a liking?

You rogue, you thief, be sure I'll keep on striking.”

The unhappy man wept and cried for mercy, but the wand still continued to strike.

The princess was distressed on hearing these cries of distress, and she watered her much-cherished apple with her tears. And, strange to tell, the apple grew and changed its shape. Thus continuing to change, it suddenly turned into a handsome young man, even the very same who had been killed that morning.

“Lovely princess, I salute you,” said the fool. “The cunning of the paladin caused my death, but with your tears you have restored me to life. Your father promised to give you to me: are you willing?”

“If such be the king’s wish, I consent,” replied she, as she gave him her hand with a tender look.

As he spoke the door opened, admitting the helmet, which placed itself upon his head; the sash, which wound itself round his waist; the tablecloth, which hid itself in one of his pockets; and the avenging wand, which placed itself in his hand. Then came the king, all out of breath, and wondering what the noise was about. He was amazed to see the fool alive again, and even more so that he should be with the princess.

The young fellow, fearing the king’s wrath, cried out:

“O marvellous, wonderful, lake-forming Band,

For my safety, and not for my fun,

Bear us in a boat on thy waves far from land,

So that we from our foes need not run.”

There was a shimmering in the air, and then everything disappeared, while on the lawn before the palace stretched a wide deep lake, in the crystal water of which swam little fish with eyes of pearl and scales of gold. Far away rowed the princess and the fool in a silver skiff. The king stood on the shores of the lake and signed to them to return. When they had landed they knelt at his feet and avowed their mutual love. Upon which his majesty bestowed his blessing, the lake disappeared, and they again found themselves in the princess’s apartments.

The king called a special meeting of his council, at which he explained how things had turned out—that he had made the fool his heir, and betrothed him to his daughter, and had put the paladin in prison.

The fool gave the king his magic treasures, and told him what words to say in each case.

Next day all their wishes were fulfilled. The fool of the family was married to the princess, and at the same time received half the kingdom, with the promise of succession to the throne. And the wedding feast, to which all the rich and noble of the land were invited, exceeded in its magnificence and splendour any other festival ever seen or heard of.

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