



The Sun; Or, The Three Golden Hairs of the Old Man

Vsévède

Fairy Tales Of The Slav Peasants And Herdsmen

Slavic

Intermediate

19 min read

Can this be a true story? It is said that once there was a king who was exceedingly fond of hunting the wild beasts in his forests. One day he followed a stag so far and so long that he lost his way. Alone and overtaken by night, he was glad to find himself near a small thatched cottage in which lived a charcoal-burner.

“Will you kindly show me the way to the high-road? You shall be handsomely rewarded.”

“I would willingly,” said the charcoal-burner, “but God is going to send my wife a little child, and I cannot leave her alone. Will you pass the night under our roof? There is a truss of sweet hay in the loft where you may rest, and to-morrow morning I will be your guide.”

The king accepted the invitation and went to bed in the loft. Shortly after a son was born to the charcoal-burner’s wife. But the king could not sleep. At midnight he heard noises in the house, and looking through a crack in the flooring he saw the charcoal-burner asleep, his wife almost in a faint, and by the side of the newly-

born babe three old women dressed in white, each holding a lighted taper in her hand, and all talking together. Now these were the three Soudiché or Fates, you must know.

The first said, "On this boy I bestow the gift of confronting great dangers."

The second said, "I bestow the power of happily escaping all these dangers, and of living to a good old age."

The third said, "I bestow upon him for wife the princess born at the selfsame hour as he, and daughter of the very king sleeping above in the loft."

At these words the lights went out and silence reigned around.

Now the king was greatly troubled, and wondered exceedingly; he felt as if he had received a sword-thrust in the chest. He lay awake all night thinking how to prevent the words of the Fates from coming true.

With the first glimmer of morning light the baby began to cry. The charcoal-burner, on going over to it, found that his wife was dead.

"Poor little orphan," he said sadly, "what will become of thee without a mother's care?"

"Confide this child to me," said the king, "I will look after it. He shall be well provided for. You shall be given a sum of money large enough to keep you without having to burn charcoal."

The poor man gladly agreed, and the king went away promising to send some one for the child. The queen and courtiers thought it would be an agreeable surprise for the king to hear that a charming little princess had been born on the night he was away. But instead of being pleased he frowned, and calling one of his servants, said to him, "Go to the charcoal-burner's cottage in the forest, and give the man this purse in exchange for a new-born infant. On your way back drown the child. See well that he is drowned, for if he should in any way escape, you yourself shall suffer in his place."

The servant was given the child in a basket, and on reaching the centre of a narrow bridge that stretched across a wide and deep river, he threw both basket and baby into the water.

"A prosperous journey to you, Mr. Son-in-Law," said the king, on hearing the servant's story: for he fully believed the child was drowned. But it was far from being the case; the little one was floating happily along in

its basket cradle, and slumbering as sweetly as if his mother had sung him to sleep. Now it happened that a fisherman, who was mending his nets before his cottage door, saw the basket floating down the river. He jumped at once into his boat, picked it up, and ran to tell his wife the good news.

“Look,” said he, “you have always longed for a son; here is a beautiful little boy the river has sent us.”

The woman was delighted, and took the infant and loved it as her own child. They named him Plavacek (the floater), because he had come to them floating on the water.

The river flowed on. Years passed away. The little baby grew into a handsome youth; in all the villages round there were none to compare with him. Now it happened that one summer day the king was riding unattended. And the heat being very great he reined in his horse before the fisherman’s door to ask for a drink of water. Plavacek brought the water. The king looked at him attentively, then turning to the fisherman, said, “That is a good-looking lad; is he your son?”

“He is and he isn’t,” replied the fisherman. “I found him, when he was quite a tiny baby, floating down the stream in a basket. So we adopted him and brought him up as our own son.”

The king turned as pale as death, for he guessed that he was the same child he had ordered to be drowned. Then recovering himself he got down from his horse and said: “I want a trusty messenger to take a letter to the palace, could you send him with it?”

“With pleasure! Your majesty may be sure of its safe delivery.”

Thereupon the king wrote to the queen as follows—

“The man who brings you this letter is the most dangerous of all my enemies. Have his head cut off at once; no delay, no pity, he must be executed before my return. Such is my will and pleasure.”

This he carefully folded and sealed with the royal seal.

Plavacek took the letter and set off immediately. But the forest through which he had to pass was so large, and the trees so thick, that he missed the path and was overtaken by the darkness before the journey was nearly over. In the midst of his trouble he met an old woman who said, “Where are you going, Plavacek? Where are

you going?”

“I am the bearer of a letter from the king to the queen, but have missed the path to the palace. Could you, good mother, put me on the right road?”

“Impossible to-day, my child; it is getting dark, and you would not have time to get there. Stay with me to-night. You will not be with strangers, for I am your godmother.”

Plavacek agreed. Thereupon they entered a pretty little cottage that seemed suddenly to sink into the earth. Now while he slept the old woman changed his letter for another, which ran thus:—

“Immediately upon the receipt of this letter introduce the bearer to the princess our daughter. I have chosen this young man for my son-in-law, and it is my wish they should be married before my return to the palace. Such is my pleasure.”

The letter was duly delivered, and when the queen had read it, she ordered everything to be prepared for the wedding. Both she and her daughter greatly enjoyed Plavacek’s society, and nothing disturbed the happiness of the newly married pair.

Within a few days the king returned, and on hearing what had taken place was very angry with the queen.

“But you expressly bade me have the wedding before your return. Come, read your letter again, here it is,” said she.

He closely examined the letter; the paper, handwriting, seal—all were undoubtedly his. He then called his son-in-law, and questioned him about his journey. Plavacek hid nothing: he told how he had lost his way, and how he had passed the night in a cottage in the forest.

“What was the old woman like?” asked the king.

From Plavacek's description the king knew it was the very same who, twenty years before, had foretold the marriage of the princess with the charcoal-burner's son. After some moments' thought the king said, "What is done is done. But you will not become my son-in-law so easily. No, i' faith! As a wedding present you must bring me three golden hairs from the head of Dède-Vsévède."

In this way he thought to get rid of his son-in-law, whose very presence was distasteful to him. The young fellow took leave of his wife and set off. "I know not which way to go," said he to himself, "but my godmother the witch will surely help me."

But he found the way easily enough. He walked on and on and on for a long time over mountain, valley, and river, until he reached the shores of the Black Sea. There he found a boat and boatman.

"May God bless you, old boatman," said he.

"And you, too, my young traveller. Where are you going?"

"To Dède-Vsévède's castle for three of his golden hairs."

"Ah, then you are very welcome. For a long weary while I have been waiting for such a messenger as you. I have been ferrying passengers across for these twenty years, and not one of them has done anything to help me. If you will promise to ask Dède-Vsévède when I shall be released from my toil I will row you across."

Plavacek promised, and was rowed to the opposite bank. He continued his journey on foot until he came in sight of a large town half in ruins, near which was passing a funeral procession. The king of that country was following his father's coffin, and with the tears running down his cheeks.

"May God comfort you in your distress," said Plavacek.

"Thank you, good traveller. Where are you going?"

"To the house of Dède-Vsévède in quest of three of his golden hairs."

“To the house of Dède-Vsévède? indeed! What a pity you did not come sooner, we have long been expecting such a messenger as you. Come and see me by and bye.”

When Plavacek presented himself at court the king said to him:

“We understand you are on your way to the house of Dède-Vsévède? Now we have an apple-tree here that bears the fruit of everlasting youth. One of these apples eaten by a man, even though he be dying, will cure him and make him young again. For the last twenty years neither fruit nor flower has been found on this tree. Will you ask Dède-Vsévède the cause of it?”

“That I will, with pleasure.”

Then Plavacek continued his journey, and as he went he came to a large and beautiful city where all was sad and silent. Near the gate was an old man who leant on a stick and walked with difficulty.

“May God bless you, good old man.”

“And you, too, my handsome young traveller. Where are you going?”

“To Dède-Vsévède’s palace in search of three of his golden hairs.”

“Ah, you are the very messenger I have so long waited for. Allow me to take you to my master the king.”

On their arrival at the palace, the king said, “I hear you are an ambassador to Dède-Vsévède. We have here a well, the water of which renews itself. So wonderful are its effects that invalids are immediately cured on drinking it, while a few drops sprinkled on a corpse will bring it to life again. For the past twenty years this well has remained dry: if you will ask old Dède-Vsévède how the flow of water may be restored I will reward you royally.”

Plavacek promised to do so, and was dismissed with good wishes. He then travelled through deep dark forests, in the midst of which might be seen a large meadow; out of it grew lovely flowers, and in the centre stood a castle built of gold. It was the home of Dède-Vsévède. So brilliant with light was it that it seemed to be built of fire. When he entered there was no one there but an old woman spinning.

“Greeting, Plavacek, I am well pleased to see you.”

She was his godmother, who had given him shelter in her cottage when he was the bearer of the king’s letter.

“Tell me what brings you here from such a distance,” she went on.

“The king would not have me for his son-in-law, unless I first got him three golden hairs from the head of Dède-Vsévède. So he sent me here to fetch them.”

The Fate laughed. “Dède-Vsévède indeed! Why, I am his mother, it is the shining sun himself. He is a child at morning time, a grown man at midday, a decrepit old man, looking as if he had lived a hundred years, at eventide. But I will see that you have the three hairs from his head; I am not your godmother for nothing. All the same you must not remain here. My son is a good lad, but when he comes home he is hungry, and would very probably order you to be roasted for his supper. Now I will turn this empty bucket upside down, and you shall hide underneath it.”

Plavacek begged the Fate to obtain from Dède-Vsévède the answers to the three questions he had been asked.

“I will do so certainly, but you must listen to what he says.”

Suddenly a blast of wind howled round the palace, and the Sun entered by a western window. He was an old man with golden hair.

“I smell human flesh,” cried he, “I am sure of it. Mother, you have some one here.”

“Star of day,” she replied, “whom could I have here that you would not see sooner than I? The fact is that in your daily journeys the scent of human flesh is always with you, so when you come home at evening it clings to you still.”

The old man said nothing, and sat down to supper. When he had finished he laid his golden head on the Fate’s lap and went to sleep. Then she pulled out a hair and threw it on the ground. It fell with a metallic sound like the vibration of a guitar string.

“What do you want, mother?” asked he.

“Nothing, my son; I was sleeping, and had a strange dream.”

“What was it, mother?”

“I thought I was in a place where there was a well, and the well was fed from a spring, the water of which cured all diseases. Even the dying were restored to health on drinking that water, and the dead who were sprinkled with it came to life again. For the last twenty years the well has run dry. What must be done to restore the flow of water?”

“That is very simple. A frog has lodged itself in the opening of the spring, this prevents the flow of water. Kill the frog, and the water will return to the well.”

He slept again, and the old woman pulled out another golden hair, and threw it on the ground.

“Mother, what do you want?”

“Nothing, my son, nothing; I was dreaming. In my dream I saw a large town, the name of which I have forgotten. And there grew an apple-tree the fruit of which had the power to make the old young again. A single apple eaten by an old man would restore to him the vigour and freshness of youth. For twenty years this tree has not borne fruit. What can be done to make it fruitful?”

“The means are not difficult. A snake hidden among the roots destroys the sap. Kill the snake, transplant the tree, and the fruit will grow as before.”

He again fell asleep, and the old woman pulled out another golden hair.

“Now look here, mother, why will you not let me sleep?” said the old man, really vexed; and he would have got up.

“Lie down, my darling son, do not disturb yourself. I am sorry I awoke you, but I have had a very strange dream. It seemed that I saw a boatman on the shores of the Black Sea, and he complained that he had been toiling at the ferry for twenty years without any one having come to take his place. For how much longer must

this poor old man continue to row?”

“He is a silly fellow. He has but to place his oars in the hands of the first comer and jump ashore. Whoever receives the oars will replace him as ferryman. But leave me in peace now, mother, and do not wake me again. I have to rise very early, and must first dry the eyes of a princess. The poor thing spends all night weeping for her husband who has been sent by the king to get three of my golden hairs.”

Next morning the wind whistled round Dède-Vsévède’s palace, and instead of an old man, a beautiful child with golden hair awoke on the old woman’s lap. It was the glorious sun. He bade her good-bye, and flew out of the eastern window. The old woman turned up the bucket and said to Plavacek, “Look, here are the three golden hairs. You now know the answers to your questions. May God direct you and send you a prosperous journey. You will not see me again, for you will have no further need of me.”

He thanked her gratefully and left her. On arriving at the town with the dried-up well, he was questioned by the king as to what news he had brought.

“Have the well carefully cleaned out,” said he, “kill the frog that obstructs the spring, and the wonderful water will flow again.”

The king did as he was advised, and rejoiced to see the water return. He gave Plavacek twelve swan-white horses, and as much gold and silver as they could carry.

On reaching the second town and being asked by the king what news he had brought, he replied, “Excellent; one could not wish for better. Dig up your apple-tree, kill the snake that lies among the roots, transplant the tree, and it will produce apples like those of former times.”

And all turned out as he had said, for no sooner was the tree replanted than it was covered with blossoms that gave it the appearance of a sea of roses. The delighted king gave him twelve raven-black horses, laden with as much wealth as they could carry. He then journeyed to the shores of the Black Sea. There the boatman questioned him as to what news he had brought respecting his release. Plavacek first crossed with his twenty-four horses to the opposite bank, and then replied that the boatman might gain his freedom by placing the oars in the hands of the first traveller who wished to be ferried over.

Plavacek's royal father-in-law could not believe his eyes when he saw Dède-Vsévède's three golden hairs. As for the princess, his young wife, she wept tears, but of joy, not sadness, to see her dear one again, and she said to him, "How did you get such splendid horses and so much wealth, dear husband?"

And he answered her, "All this represents the price paid for the weariness of spirit I have felt; it is the ready money for hardships endured and services given. Thus, I showed one king how to regain possession of the Apples of Youth: to another I told the secret of reopening the spring of water that gives health and life."

"Apples of Youth! Water of Life!" interrupted the king. "I will certainly go and find these treasures for myself. Ah, what joy! having eaten of these apples I shall become young again; having drunk of the Water of Immortality, I shall live for ever."

And he started off in search of these treasures. But he has not yet returned from his search.

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