



The Three Golden Hairs: The Story of a Charcoal-Burner's Son Who Married a Princess

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Easy

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There was once a king who took great delight in hunting. One day he followed a stag a great distance into the forest. He went on and on until he lost his way. Night fell and the king by happy chance came upon a clearing where a charcoal-burner had a cottage. The king asked the charcoal-burner to lead him out of the forest and offered to pay him handsomely.

“I’d be glad to go with you,” the charcoal-burner said, “but my wife is expecting the birth of a child and I cannot leave her. It is too late for you to start out alone. Won’t you spend the night here? Lie down on some hay in the garret and tomorrow I’ll be your guide.”

The king had to accept this arrangement. He climbed into the garret and lay down on the floor. Soon afterwards a son was born to the charcoal-burner.

At midnight the king noticed a strange light in the room below him. He peeped through a chink in the boards and saw the charcoal-burner asleep, his wife lying in a dead faint, and three old women, all in white, standing

over the baby, each holding a lighted taper in her hand.

The first old woman said: "My gift to this boy is that he shall encounter great dangers."

The second said: "My gift to him is that he shall go safely through them all, and live long."

The third one said: "And I give him for wife the baby daughter born this night to the king who lies upstairs on the straw."

The three old women blew out their tapers and all was quiet. They were the Fates.

The king felt as though a sword had been thrust into his heart. He lay awake till morning trying to think out some plan by which he could thwart the will of the three old Fates.

When day broke the child began to cry and the charcoal-burner woke up. Then he saw that his wife had died during the night.

"Ah, my poor motherless child," he cried, "what shall I do with you now?"

"Give me the baby," the king said. "I'll see that he's looked after properly and I'll give you enough money to keep you the rest of your life."

The charcoal-burner was delighted with this offer and the king went away promising to send at once for the baby.

A few days later when he reached his palace he was met with the joyful news that a beautiful little baby daughter had been born to him. He asked the time of her birth, and of course it was on the very night when he saw the Fates. Instead of being pleased at the safe arrival of the baby princess, the king frowned.

Then he called one of his stewards and said to him: "Go into the forest in a direction that I shall tell you. You will find there a cottage where a charcoal-burner lives. Give him this money and get from him a little child. Take the child and on your way back drown it. Do as I say or I shall have you drowned."

The steward went, found the charcoal-burner, and took the child. He put it into a basket and carried it away. As he was crossing a broad river he dropped the basket into the water.

"Goodnight to you, little son-in-law that nobody wanted!" the king said when he heard what the steward had

done.

He supposed of course that the baby was drowned. But it wasn't. Its little basket floated in the water like a cradle, and the baby slept as if the river were singing it a lullaby. It floated down with the current past a fisherman's cottage. The fisherman saw it, got into his boat, and went after it. When he found what the basket contained he was overjoyed. At once he carried the baby to his wife and said:

"You have always wanted a little son and here you have one. The river has given him to us."

The fisherman's wife was delighted and brought up the child as her own. They named him Plavachek, which means a little boy who has come floating on the water.

The river flowed on and the days went by and Plavachek grew from a baby to a boy and then into a handsome youth, the handsomest by far in the whole countryside.

One day the king happened to ride that way unattended. It was hot and he was thirsty. He beckoned to the fisherman to get him a drink of fresh water. Plavachek brought it to him. The king looked at the handsome youth in astonishment.

"You have a fine lad," he said to the fisherman. "Is he your own son?"

"He is, yet he isn't," the fisherman answered. "Just twenty years ago a little baby in a basket floated down the river. We took him in and he has been ours ever since."

A mist rose before the king's eyes and he went deathly pale, for he knew at once that Plavachek was the child that he had ordered drowned.

Soon he recovered himself and jumping from his horse he said: "I need a messenger to send to my palace and I have no one with me. Could this youth go for me?"

"Your majesty has but to command," the fisherman said, "and Plavachek will go."

The king sat down and wrote a letter to the queen. This is what he said:

"Have the young man who delivers this letter run through with a sword at once. He is a dangerous enemy. Let him be dispatched before I return. Such is my will."

He folded the letter, made it secure, and sealed it with his own signet.

Plavachek took the letter and started out with it at once. He had to go through a deep forest where he missed the path and lost his way. He struggled on through underbrush and thicket until it began to grow dark. Then he met an old woman who said to him:

“Where are you going, Plavachek?”

“I’m carrying this letter to the king’s palace and I’ve lost my way. Can you put me on the right road, mother?”

“You can’t get there today,” the old woman said. “It’s dark now. Spend the night with me. You won’t be with a stranger, for I’m your old godmother.”

Plavachek allowed himself to be persuaded and presently he saw before him a pretty little house that seemed at that moment to have sprung out of the ground.

During the night while Plavachek was asleep, the old woman took the letter out of his pocket and put in another that read as follows:

“Have the young man who delivers this letter married to our daughter at once. He is my destined son-in-law. Let the wedding take place before I return. Such is my will.”

The next day Plavachek delivered the letter and as soon as the queen read it, she gave orders at once for the wedding. Both she and her daughter were much taken with the handsome youth and gazed at him with tender eyes. As for Plavachek he fell instantly in love with the princess and was delighted to marry her.

Some days after the wedding the king returned and when he heard what had happened he flew into a violent rage at the queen.

“But,” protested the queen, “you yourself ordered me to have him married to our daughter before you came back. Here is your letter.”

The king took the letter and examined it carefully. The handwriting, the seal, the paper—all were his own.

He called his son-in-law and questioned him.

Plavachek related how he had lost his way in the forest and spent the night with his godmother.

“What does your godmother look like?” the king asked.

Plavachek described her.

From the description the king recognized her as the same old woman who had promised the princess to the charcoal-burner’s son twenty years before.

He looked at Plavachek thoughtfully and at last he said:

“What’s done can’t be undone. However, young man, you can’t expect to be my son-in-law for nothing. If you want my daughter you must bring me for dowry three of the golden hairs of old Grandfather Knowitall.”

He thought to himself that this would be an impossible task and so would be a good way to get rid of an undesirable son-in-law.

Plavachek took leave of his bride and started off. He didn’t know which way to go. Who would know? Everybody talked about old Grandfather Knowitall, but nobody seemed to know where to find him. Yet Plavachek had a Fate for a godmother, so it wasn’t likely that he would miss the right road.

He traveled long and far, going over wooded hills and desert plains and crossing deep rivers. He came at last to a black sea.

There he saw a boat and an old ferryman.

“God bless you, old ferryman!” he said.

“May God grant that prayer, young traveler! Where are you going?”

“I’m going to old Grandfather Knowitall to get three of his golden hairs.”

“Oho! I have long been hunting for just such a messenger as you! For twenty years I have been ferrying people across this black sea and nobody has come to relieve me. If you promise to ask Grandfather Knowitall when my work will end, I’ll ferry you over.”

Plavachek promised and the boatman took him across.

Plavachek traveled on until he came to a great city that was in a state of decay. Before the city he met an old man who had a staff in his hand, but even with the staff he could scarcely crawl along.

“God bless you, old grandfather!” Plavachek said.

“May God grant that prayer, handsome youth! Where are you going?”

“I am going to old Grandfather Knowitall to get three of his golden hairs.”

“Indeed! We have been waiting a long time for just such a messenger as you! I must lead you at once to the king.”

So he took him to the king and the king said: “Ah, so you are going on an errand to Grandfather Knowitall! We have an apple-tree here that used to bear apples of youth. If any one ate one of those apples, no matter how aged he was, he’d become young again. But, alas, for twenty years now our tree has borne no fruit. If you promise to ask Grandfather Knowitall if there is any help for us, I will reward you handsomely.”

Plavachek gave the king his promise and the king bid him godspeed.

Plavachek traveled on until he reached another great city that was half in ruins. Not far from the city a man was burying his father, and tears as big as peas were rolling down his cheek.

“God bless you, mournful grave-digger!” Plavachek said.

“May God grant that prayer, kind traveler! Where are you going?”

“I’m going to old Grandfather Knowitall to get three of his golden hairs.”

“To Grandfather Knowitall! What a pity you didn’t come sooner! Our king has long been waiting for just such a messenger as you! I must lead you to him.”

So he took Plavachek to the king and the king said to him: “So you’re going on an errand to Grandfather Knowitall. We have a well here that used to flow with the water of life. If any one drank of it, no matter how sick he was, he would get well. Nay, if he were already dead, this water, sprinkled upon him, would bring him back to life. But, alas, for twenty years now the well has gone dry. If you promise to ask Grandfather Knowitall

if there is help for us, I will reward you handsomely.”

Plavachek gave the king his promise and the king bid him godspeed.

After that Plavachek traveled long and far into a black forest. Deep in the forest he came upon a broad green meadow full of beautiful flowers and in its midst a golden palace glittering as though it were on fire. This was the palace of Grandfather Knowitall.

Plavachek entered and found nobody there but an old woman who sat spinning in a corner.

“Welcome, Plavachek,” she said. “I am delighted to see you again.”

He looked at the old woman and saw that she was his godmother with whom he had spent the night when he was carrying the letter to the palace.

“What has brought you here, Plavachek?” she asked.

“The king, godmother. He says I can’t be his son-in-law for nothing. I have to give a dowry. So he has sent me to old Grandfather Knowitall to get three of his golden hairs.”

The old woman smiled and said: “Do you know who Grandfather Knowitall is? Why, he’s the bright Sun who goes everywhere and sees everything. I am his mother. In the morning he’s a little lad, at noon he’s a grown man, and in the evening an old grandfather. I will get you three of the golden hairs from his golden head, for I must not be a godmother for nothing! But, my lad, you mustn’t remain where you are. My son is kind, but if he comes home hungry he might want to roast you and eat you for his supper. There’s an empty tub over there and I’ll just cover you with it.”

Plavachek begged his godmother to get from Grandfather Knowitall the answers for the three questions he had promised to ask.

“I will,” said the old woman, “and do you listen carefully to what he says.”

Suddenly there was the rushing sound of a mighty wind outside and the Sun, an old grandfather with a golden head, flew in by the western window. He sniffed the air suspiciously.

“Phew! Phew!” he cried. “I smell human flesh! Have you any one here, mother?”

“Star of the day, whom could I have here without your seeing him? The truth is you’ve been flying all day long over God’s world and your nose is filled with the smell of human flesh. That’s why you still smell it when you come home in the evening.”

The old man said nothing more and sat down to his supper.

After supper he laid his head on the old woman’s lap and fell sound asleep. The old woman pulled out a golden hair and threw it on the floor. It twanged like the string of a violin.

“What is it, mother?” the old man said. “What is it?”

“Nothing, my boy, nothing. I was asleep and had a wonderful dream.”

“What did you dream about, mother?”

“I dreamt about a city where they had a well of living water. If any one drank of it, no matter how sick he was, he would get well. Nay, if he were already dead, this water, sprinkled on him, would bring him back to life. For the last twenty years the well has gone dry. Is there anything to be done to make it flow again?”

“Yes. There’s a frog sitting on the spring that feeds the well. Let them kill the frog and clean out the well and the water will flow as before.”

When he fell asleep again the old woman pulled out another golden hair and threw it on the floor.

“What is it, mother?”

“Nothing, my boy, nothing. I was asleep again and I had a wonderful dream. I dreamt of a city where they had an apple-tree that bore apples of youth. If any one ate one of those apples, no matter how aged he was, he’d become young again. But for twenty years the tree has borne no fruit. Can anything be done about it?”

“Yes. In the roots of the tree there is a snake that takes its strength. Let them kill the snake and transplant the tree. Then it will bear fruit as before.”

He fell asleep again and the old woman pulled out a third golden hair.

“Why won’t you let me sleep, mother?” he complained, and started to sit up.

“Lie still, my boy, lie still. I didn’t intend to wake you, but a heavy sleep fell upon me and I had another wonderful dream. I dreamt of a boatman on the black sea. For twenty years he has been ferrying that boat and no one has offered to relieve him. When will he be relieved?”

“Ah, but that boatman is the son of a stupid mother! Why doesn’t he thrust the oar into the hand of some one else and jump ashore himself? Then the other man would have to be ferryman in his place. But now let me be quiet. I must get up early tomorrow morning and go and dry the tears which the king’s daughter sheds every night for her husband, the charcoal-burner’s son, whom the king has sent to get three of my golden hairs.”

In the morning there was again the rushing sound of a mighty wind outside and a beautiful golden child—no longer an old man—awoke on his mother’s lap. It was the glorious Sun. He bade his mother farewell and flew out by an eastern window.

The old woman turned over the tub and said to Plavachek: “Here are the three golden hairs for you. You also have Grandfather Knowitall’s answers to your three questions. Now good-bye. As you will need me no more, you will never see me again.”

Plavachek thanked his godmother most gratefully and departed.

When he reached the first city the king asked him what news he brought.

“Good news!” Plavachek said. “Have the well cleaned out and kill the frog that sits on its spring. If you do this the water will flow again as it used to.”

The king ordered this to be done at once and when he saw the water beginning to bubble up and flow again, he made Plavachek a present of twelve horses, white as swans, laden with as much gold and silver as they could carry.

When Plavachek came to the second city and the king of that city asked him what news he brought, he said:

“Good news! Have the apple tree dug up. At its roots you will find a snake. Kill the snake and replant the tree. Then it will bear fruit as it used to.”

The king had this done at once and during the night the tree burst into bloom and bore great quantities of fruit. The king was delighted and made Plavachek a present of twelve horses, black as ravens, laden with as

much riches as they could carry.

Plavachek traveled on and when he came to the black sea, the boatman asked him had he the answer to his question.

“Yes, I have,” said Plavachek, “but you must ferry me over before I tell you.”

The boatman wanted to hear the answer at once, but Plavachek was firm. So the old man ferried him across with his twelve white horses and his twelve black horses.

When Plavachek was safely landed, he said: “The next person who comes to be ferried over, thrust the oar into his hand and do you jump ashore. Then the other man will have to be boatman in your place.”

Plavachek traveled home to the palace. The king could scarcely believe his eyes when he saw the three golden hairs of Grandfather Knowitall. The princess wept again, not for sorrow this time but for joy at her bridegroom’s return.

“But, Plavachek,” the king gasped, “where did you get these beautiful horses and all these riches?”

“I earned them,” said Plavachek proudly. Then he related how he helped one king who had a tree of the apples of youth and another king who had a well of the water of life.

“Apples of youth! Water of life!” the king kept repeating softly to himself. “If I ate one of those apples I should become young again! If I were dead the water of life would restore me!”

He lost no time in starting out in quest of the apples of youth and the water of life. And do you know, he hasn’t come back yet!

So Plavachek, the charcoal-burner’s son, became the king’s son-in-law as the old Fate foretold.

As for the king, well, I fear he’s still ferrying that boat across the black sea!

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