



The Wonderful Hair

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Slavic

Intermediate
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There once lived a man who was very poor, and who had many children; so many that he was unable to support them. As he could not endure the idea of their perishing of hunger, he was often tempted to destroy them; his wife alone prevented him. One night, as he lay asleep, there appeared to him a lovely child in a vision. The child said,—

“Oh, man! I see your soul is in danger, in the thought of killing your helpless children. But I know you are poor, and am come here to help you. You will find under your pillow in the morning a looking-glass, a red handkerchief, and an embroidered scarf. Take these three things, but show them to no one, and go to the forest. In that forest you will find a rivulet. Walk by the side of this rivulet until you come to its source; there you will see a girl, as bright as the sun, with long hair streaming down her shoulders. Take care that she does you no harm. Say not a word to her; for if you utter a single syllable, she will change you into a fish, or some other creature, and eat you. Should she ask you to comb her hair, obey her. As you comb it, you will find one hair as red as blood; pull it out, and run away with it. Be swift, for she will follow you. Then throw on the ground, first the embroidered scarf, then the red handkerchief, and last of all the looking-glass; they will delay her pursuit of you. Sell the hair to some rich man; but see that you do not allow yourself to be cheated, for it is of boundless worth. Its produce will make you rich, and thus you will be able to feed your children.”

Next morning, when the poor man awoke, he found under his pillow exactly the things the child had told him of in his dream. He went immediately into the forest, and when he had discovered the rivulet he walked by the side of it, on and on, until he reached its source. There he saw a girl sitting on the bank, threading a needle with the rays of the sun. She was embroidering a net made of the hair of heroes, spread on a frame before her. He approached and bowed to her. The girl got up and demanded,—”Where did you come from, strange knight?”

The man remained silent. Again she asked him,—

“Who are you, and why do you come here?” And many other questions. But he remained silent as a stone, indicating with his hands only that he was dumb and in need of help. She told him to sit at her feet, and when he had gladly done so, she inclined her head towards him, that he might comb her hair. He began to arrange her hair as if to comb it, but as soon as he had found the red one, he separated it from the rest, plucked it out, leapt up, and ran from her with his utmost speed.

The girl sprang after him, and was soon at his heels. The man, turning round as he ran, and seeing that his pursuer would soon overtake him, threw the embroidered scarf on the ground, as he had been told. When the girl saw it, she stopped and began to examine it; turning it over on both sides, and admiring the embroidery. Meanwhile the man gained a considerable distance in advance. The girl tied the scarf round her bosom and recommenced the pursuit. When the man saw that she was again about to overtake him, he threw down the red handkerchief. At the sight of it, the girl again stopped, examined, and wondered at it; the peasant, in the meantime, was again enabled to increase the distance between them. When the girl perceived this, she became furious, and throwing away both scarf and handkerchief began to run with increased speed after him. She was just upon the point of catching the poor peasant, when he threw the looking-glass at her feet. At the sight of the looking-glass, the like of which she had never seen before, the girl checked herself, picked it up, and looked in it. Seeing her own face, she fancied there was another girl looking at her. While she was thus occupied the man ran so far that she could not possibly overtake him. When the girl saw that further pursuit was useless, she turned back, and the peasant, joyful and unhurt, reached his home. Once within doors he showed the hair to his wife and children, and told them all that had happened to him; but his wife only laughed at the story. The peasant, however, took no heed of her ridicule, but went to a neighbouring town to sell the hair. He was soon

surrounded by a crowd of people, and some merchants began to bid for his prize. One merchant offered him one gold piece, another two, for the single hair, and so on, until the price rose to a hundred gold pieces. Meanwhile the king, hearing of the wonderful red hair, ordered the peasant to be called in, and offered him a thousand gold pieces for it. The man joyfully sold it for that sum.

What wonderful kind of hair was this after all? The king split it carefully open from end to end, and in it was found the story of many marvellous secrets of nature, and of things that had happened since the creation of the world.

Thus the peasant became rich, and henceforth lived happily with his wife and children. The child he had seen in his dream was an angel sent down from heaven to succour him, and to reveal to mankind the knowledge of many wonderful things which had hitherto remained unexplained.

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