



The Wonderful Plough

Folk-Lore And Legends: Scandinavia

Scandinavian

Intermediate
8 min read

Author's note: This story is from the Isle of Rugen

There was once a farmer who was master of one of the little black dwarfs that are the blacksmiths and armourers, and he got him in a very curious way. On the road leading to this farmer's ground there stood a stone cross, and every morning as he went to his work he used to stop and kneel down before this cross, and pray for some minutes.

On one of these occasions he noticed on the cross a pretty, bright insect, of such a brilliant hue that he could not recollect having ever before seen the like in an insect. He wondered greatly at this, but still he did not disturb it. The insect did not remain long quiet, but ran without ceasing backwards and forwards upon the cross, as if it was in pain and wanted to get away.

Next morning the farmer again saw the very same insect, and again it was running to and fro in the same state of uneasiness. The farmer began now to have some suspicions about it, and thought to himself—

“Would this now be one of the little black enchanters? It runs about just like one that has an evil conscience, as one that would, but cannot, get away.”

A variety of thoughts and conjectures passed through his mind, and he remembered what he had often heard

from his father and other old people, that when any of the underground people chance to touch anything holy they are held fast and cannot quit the spot, and so they are extremely careful to avoid all such things.

“But,” thought he, “you may even be something else, and I should, perhaps, be committing a sin in taking the little insect away.”

So he let it stay where it was.

When, however, he twice again found it in the same place, and still running about with the same signs of uneasiness, he said—

“No, it is not all right with it, so now, in the name of God.”

He made a grasp at the insect, which resisted and clung fast to the stone; but he held it tight, and tore it away by main force, and lo! then he found he had, by the top of the head, a little ugly black chap, about six inches long, screeching and kicking at a furious rate.

The farmer was greatly astounded at this sudden transformation. Still he held his prize fast, and kept calling to him, while he administered to him a few smart slaps—

“Be quiet, be quiet, my little man! If crying was to do the business, we might look for heroes in swaddling-clothes. We’ll just take you with us a bit, and see what you are good for.”

The little fellow trembled and shook in every limb, and then began to whimper most piteously, and begged of the farmer to let him go.

“No, my lad,” replied the farmer, “I will not let you go till you tell me who you are, and how you came here, and what trade you know that enables you to earn your bread in the world.”

At this the little man grinned and shook his head, but said not a word in reply, only begging and praying the more to get loose. The farmer thought he must now entreat him if he would coax any information out of him. But it was all to no purpose. He then adopted the contrary method, and whipped and slashed him, but just to as little effect. The little black thing remained as dumb as the grave, for this species is the most malicious and obstinate of all the underground folk.

The farmer now got angry, and said—

“Do but be quiet, my child. I should be a fool to put myself into a passion with such a little brat. Never fear, I shall soon make you tame enough.”

So saying, he ran home with him, and clapped him into a black sooty iron pot, and put the iron lid upon it, and laid on the top of the lid a great heavy stone. Then he set the pot in a dark, cold room, and as he was going out, said to him—

“Stay there, now, and freeze till you are black! I’ll engage that at last you will answer me civilly.”

Twice a week the farmer went regularly into the room and asked his little black captive if he would answer him now, but the little one still obstinately persisted in his silence. The farmer had, without success, pursued this course for six weeks, at the end of which time his prisoner at last gave up. One day, as the farmer was opening the room door, of his own accord he asked him to come and take him out of his dirty, gloomy dungeon, promising that he would now cheerfully do all that was wanted of him.

The farmer first ordered him to tell him his history. The black one replied—

“My dear friend, you know it just as well as I do, or else you never would have had me here. You see I happened by chance to come too near the cross, a thing we little people may not do, and then I was held fast, and obliged instantly to let my body become visible. In order that people might not recognise me, I turned myself into an insect. But you found me out. When we get fastened to holy or consecrated things we can never get away from them unless a man takes us off. That, however, does not happen without plague and annoyance to us; though, indeed, to say the truth, the staying fastened there is not over pleasant. So I struggled against you too, for we have a natural aversion to let ourselves be taken in a man’s hand.”

“Ho, ho! is that the tune with you?” cried the farmer. “You have a natural aversion have you? Believe me, my sooty friend, I have just the same for you, and so you shall be away without a moment’s delay, and we will lose no time in making our bargain with each other. But you must first make me some present.”

“What you will you have only to ask,” said the little one, “silver and gold, and precious stones, and costly furniture—all shall be thine in less than an instant.”

“Silver and gold, and precious stones, and all such glittering fine things, will I none,” said the farmer. “They have turned the heart and broken the neck of many a one before now, and few are they whose lives they make happy. I know that you are handy smiths, and have many a strange thing with you that other smiths know nothing about. So, come now, swear to me that you will make me an iron plough, such that the smallest foal may be able to draw it without being tired, and then run off with you as fast as your legs will carry you.” So the black swore, and then the farmer cried out—

“Now, in the name of God. There you are at liberty,” and the little one vanished like lightning.

Next morning, before the sun was up, there stood in the farmer’s yard a new iron plough, and he yoked his dog, Water, to it; and though it was of the size of an ordinary plough, Water drew it with ease through the heaviest clayland, and it tore up prodigious furrows. The farmer used this plough for many years, and the smallest foal or the leanest little horse could draw it through the ground, to the amazement of every one who beheld it, without turning a single hair.

This plough made a rich man of the farmer, for it cost him no horse-flesh, and he led a cheerful and contented life by means of it.

Hereby we may see that moderation holds out the longest, and that it is not good to covet too much.

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