

Slavonic: The Three Golden Hairs

Sixty Folk-Tales from Exclusively Slavonic Sources collected by Wratishlaw

Once upon a time there was a king who loved hunting. One day he was stalking a stag, he was led deep into the forest and became lost. When night fell, he did not know how to find his way out again. The king came upon a clearing in the woods where there was a cottage lived in by a poor woodsman and his wife. So, the king knocked on the door and told the woodsman that he would pay him a very good reward if he would lead him out of the forest.

“Of course, I would be glad to help you,” said the woodsman, “but my wife is in labor with our first child right now, so I cannot leave her.

Since it is too late for you to wonder about the woods alone, please stay the night here with us. I will make a bed for you in the loft, and tomorrow I will guide you safely out of the forest.” So, the king agreed to this and climbed up into the loft to sleep for the night.

After such a long day, the king was quite tired so he quickly fell asleep. But, he was awoken at the stroke of midnight by a strange light and sounds coming from the room below him. Peering down through the rafters, the king observed the woodsman was fast asleep, and his wife, who had fainted during childbirth, lay silently beside him. As his eyes scanned the room, he had to stifle a gasp at what he saw. For suddenly there appeared in the room an apparition. Standing above the newborn's cradle were three otherworldly women. The woman appeared elderly with stark white hair, and they were dressed in flowing white gowns of gauze. Each woman held a single burning candle in her hand. And one by one they began to speak.

The first woman said, “My gift to this boy is that he shall encounter great dangers upon his journey.”

The second said, “My gift to him is that he shall face the dangers bravely, they shall do him no harm, and he will live a long life.”

And, lastly the third old woman said, “and for my gift, I give him for his wife the baby daughter who is also born on this night to the very king who lies upstairs just now.”

Then, all three women blew out their candles, and they disappeared! The king knew that he had just witnessed the three Fates deciding the destiny of the baby boy. They had decreed that the son of these destitute peasants would marry his daughter, and thereby inherit his kingdom. So, he lay awake the rest of the night trying to think of a way to thwart the designs of the three old Fates.

When the day finally dawned, the child began to cry in his cradle. It was then that the poor woodsman saw that his wife had died in the night. Holding his infant son, he cried, “Oh, my poor little orphan! What shall I do with you now that you have no mother to nurse you?”

Seeing this as his opportunity to change fate, the king stepped in. “You have been so kind to me, let me return your charity,” he lied. “Give the child to me and I’ll see that he is raised in a

good home. In addition, I will give you enough money so that you will live in comfort for the rest of your life.”

The woodsman did not see how he could refuse, for the child would need to be fed and cared for while he had to be away from home working during each day. This seemed like a generous offer, and so he accepted the king's suggestion. The duplicitous king gleefully promised to send for the infant right away after he returned to his palace.

It was a few days' journey before the king made it home to his palace. Upon arrival, he was given the joyous news that, indeed, his wife had given birth to a little girl. He asked for the day and time of her birth, and sure enough, she had been born on the same evening as the woodsman's son when he saw the Fates dictate the two children's destinies. So, instead of feeling overjoyed, a scowl came upon the king's face.

Quickly, he called over a servant and gave him instructions. “Here, take this money and go into the forest until you come to the clearing where the woodsman lives. Tell him this money comes from the king and assure him his child will be in safe hands. Once he hands the child over, take him to the river and drown him! Do as you are told or I will have you drowned!”

The servant did as he was told and found the woodsman at his cottage in the forest. The woodsman placed his tiny infant in a breadbasket and then exchanged his son for the money with the expectation that his son would live in comfort. The servant assured him that his child would be in safe hands and left with the baby in the breadbasket. But, when he got to the bridge to cross the river, the servant, as the king instructed him, dropped the basket with the infant inside into the current below.

When the king heard that the mission had been completed he snickered and sneered, “goodnight to you, little son-in-law that nobody wanted!” What the king never suspected was that the baby never drowned. In fact, the breadbasket held the child comfortably as a cradle. As he floated along down the river, the water soothed the little boy softly to sleep.

Eventually, the basket floated along until it reached a river bend beside a fisherman's cottage. Seeing a basket floating down the river, the fisherman thought there might be something of value inside. So, he hopped into his small fishing boat and went after the basket. Upon retrieving it, he opened it up and peered inside to see a blessing greater than any treasure he could have imagined, for he and his wife had been wishing desperately for a child.

The fisherman brought the infant home to his wife and said, “my dear, all these years you have yearned for a little boy, and now you have one. The river has sent him to us!” the fisherman's wife was overwhelmed with joy. They named the child Plavachek, which means “a little boy who has come floating on the water.”

Well, the river flowed on and on as the days rolled by. And, soon enough, Plavachek grew from a baby to a boy, and then into a very handsome young man. He was by far the best looking youth in the entire countryside.

One day, the king again rode out that way without any attendants. It was quite a hot day, and the king became very thirsty. So, he stopped at the fisherman's cottage and bid him for a drink of cool water. Plavachek brought it out to the king who looked at the young man with awe.

“What a fine lad you have there!” the king said to the fisherman. “Is he your own son?” the king asked

The fisherman grinned, for he never tired of telling of the good fortune that he and his wife received when they were blessed with their river-child. “Well, he is and he isn’t,” and he told the king the story about how twenty years ago he had fished the breadbasket from the water. Well, the king went deathly pale before turning red with rage, for he knew immediately that Plavachek was the very same child whom he had ordered downed in the river. But, he quickly came to his senses and calmed himself in order to think fast. “Listen here,” the king said to the fisherman, “I really must get a message delivered to my palace and I have servants with me. Would your son deliver it for me? He will be paid well for his service.”

The fisherman felt that a favor for the king must be yet another stroke of luck for his modest family and so he said, “but, of course, your majesty! Plavachek will be happy to serve you.”

So, the king sat down and wrote a letter which he did not let the others see. The letter said “the young man who delivers this letter is an enemy and a danger to the crown! Have the guards run him through with their swords immediately! Let him be executed even before I return, this is my command.” and then he folded up the letter and sealed it with his own signet ring.

Having no idea the contents of the letter, Plavachek set out on his journey for the palace. He had to go through a deep, dark forest. Somehow, he veered off the path and lost his way. Night began to fall, and without the light of day, Plavachek struggled through the bramble and the underbrush. Suddenly, an old woman appeared beneath the trees. “Plavachek, why are you alone in the woods so late at night? Where are you headed?”

Plavachek was not sure how this lady knew his name, but he was raised to show respect to his elders, so he simply answered her question. “I am carrying a letter from the king to his own palace upon his request. Can you point me to the road, good lady?”

“You’ll not make it there tonight my dear boy.” the old woman said kindly. “Say, why don’t you come and spend the night at mine.” When he looked hesitant, she reached and gently touched his arm saying, “Plavachek, don’t you know me? I’m your own godmother!”

Well, Plavachek had no memory of her at all, but he thought it must be true for how else would she have known his name? And, it was getting quite cold in the damp dark night, so a warm bed seemed like the best option. He agreed, and the two started walking together. Suddenly they came upon the prettiest little cottage Plavachek had never seen, and it seemed to appear out of nowhere.

The two entered the cottage, and the young man felt quite at ease inside. He never knew that he had a godmother, but her home was every bit as cozy and welcoming as he had always imagined a grandmother cottage would be, if he ever had one. So the old woman, his own godmother, made up a nice bed for him and, tired from his journey, Plavachek quickly fell fast asleep.

While he was snoozing away, the old woman quietly reached into his pocket and withdrew the letter written by the sinister king. She swapped it out with another letter that

appeared written in the king's own hand and sealed with his signet ring, the new letter now read, "the young man who delivers this letter is well known for his good character and handsome countenance. There is no better suitor in the land who would more deserve the hand of my fair daughter. He is destined to be my son-in law. Have the wedding commence as quickly as possible, even before my return. This is my command."

So, the next day, Plavachek awoke well rested and refreshed. His godmother gave him a hearty breakfast and sent him along on his journey. He arrived at the palace later that day to deliver the letter, having never known what was in the original letter or that the letter had been changed. When he told the guards that he held a letter written by the king himself for no one's eyes but the queen, he was taken to her throne room. Plavachek had never been among such noble presences before, apart from meeting the king. But, the queen in all her regalia and in the magnificent palace was a vision of opulence that intimidated the poor peasant boy. His knees trembled as he handed the queen the letter.

The queen was very kindly, the opposite of her husband. She smiled at the young man, for she could see the goodness in his eyes, as she received the parchment. As soon as she finished reading it, she looked down again at Plavachek and smiled again warmly. At once, she called for the princess to be brought to the throne room and introduced her to her betrothed. Plavachek was stunned, and also embarrassed, as he stood there in his lowly peasants' garb beside the most beautiful woman he had ever laid eyes upon. The queen saw his trepidation and placed her hand on his shoulder saying, "My dear boy, do not worry. You must have been chosen for my daughter with good reason. From this day onward, you will never dress in peasants' clothes again."

Then she had the servant take him to be dressed in finery fit for a prince. She ordered a great wedding feast to be prepared at once, and the two young people were married that very evening.

The king, of course, returned to his palace soon enough. He hurried into the throne room, eager for his wife to confirm that the pesky young man was slain as he commanded. However, when his wife saw him, her face beamed and she rushed to embrace him telling him how please she and their daughter were with his choice in a husband. The king wrenched his wife away from him enraged. The queen, of course, was vexed and perplexed by her husband's reaction. "But, my darling," she exclaimed as she thrust the letter still bearing his signet into his hand.

"This cannot be my letter!" bellowed the angry monarch. He closely examined the document and saw that the handwriting, the seal, and the paper were all exactly the same as his. Immediately he called for Plavachek to question him. And so, Plavachek explained how he traveled directly from his home to the palace, stopping only for the night with his godmother. The kind needed him some more, asking him what his grandmother looked like. And, as Plavachek described her, the king knew instantly that the boy's godmother was the very same old woman whom he had seen through the floorboards of the woodsman's cabin on the night the boy was born. It was the Fate who had promised the poor woodsman's son would marry the princess, some twenty years ago.

At this point, the king did not know what to do. He realized that he could not stop fate now, for the two young people were already married. But, still, his pride could not accept that

this peasant could waltz into his palace and marry his daughter so easily. So, after a moment of silence, the king looked Plavachek in the eye and said, “well, what is done cannot be undone. But, see here, young man, you must understand that you cannot expect to marry the daughter of a king for nothing, for whomever marries my daughter will inherit my kingdom. So, if you want to remain with my daughter, you must obtain a dowry fit for a princess.”

This sounded reasonable enough to Plavachek, so he agreed that he would seek whatever the king demanded for a dowry. Then the king pronounced, “to remain with my daughter, you must journey to Grandfather Know-it-all and obtain three golden hairs from his very own head. Nothing less will suffice.” The king was smug now, for he thought to himself that this was such an impossible task that it was just the way to dispose of this low-born peasant who he felt was unworthy to be his son-in-law.

Well, Plavachek did not think twice. He was in love with his new bride and he would walk to the ends of the Earth to keep her. So, he kissed the princess goodbye and started off to seek her dowry. But, he had no idea what direction to travel in. Who would know where to find Grandfather Know-it-all? Everyone spoke of him, but nobody seemed to know where to find him. This was precisely what the king had been thinking. But, the king forgot one thing. Plavachek had a fate for a godmother, so it was not likely that he would take the wrong road.

Plavachek traveled long and far, over wooded hills and desert plains. He crossed deep valleys and raging rivers. Onward he journeyed, until he found himself at a dark sea. At the edge of the sea he saw that a boat stood waiting, and upon it was an old ferryman. Friendly fellow that he was, Plavachek called out, “God bless you, old ferryman!”

“Thank you! May God grant that prayer, for my days are long and weary,” answered the old man. “Where are you headed, young traveler?”

“I am going to see Grandfather Know-it-all to get three of his golden hairs,” Plavachek answered cheerfully.

“You don’t say?” replied the ferryman. “For some twenty years I have been waiting for a seeker such as yourself! For all this time I have been ferrying people back and forth across this black sea and nobody has come to relieve me. I will ferry you to the other side if you will promise to ask Grandfather Know-it-all when my work will end.”

Plavachek said that was no problem, and so the ferryman steered his vessel to the other side of the dark sea. From there, Plavachek continued on his journey. Onward he traveled, and eventually he came to a city that was in a terrible state of decay. At the city gates, he met an old man who crawled along, pulling himself along the ground with a staff. Plavachek greeted him, “God bless you, old grandfather!”

“May God grant that prayer,” answered the old man, “for the whole city is in decline and I have suffered so, tell me handsome fellow, where do you travel?”

“I am going to old Grandfather Know-it-all to get three of his golden hairs,” Plavachek again answered cheerfully.

The old man broke a grin and remarked, “Well, well! I have been waiting for some time for a seeker such as you! I must bring you to the king!”

So, the decrepit old man led Plavachek to his king, who was very pleased to hear of his destination. “Ah, so you are going to Grandfather Know-it-all! Excellent! Dear boy, please will you help us? We have an apple tree here in this city that used to bear the apples of youth. If anyone ate just one apple, no matter how old and withered he was, he would become young again. But alas, for twenty years now our tree has not born any fruit at all. If you would ask Grandfather Know-it-all why the apples have stopped growing, then I will reward you handsomely.” Plavachek said that he was happy to do this favor, and then he set off again on his journey.

On and on he traveled until he came to another city. Like the last city, this one was not in a very good state either. The whole city appeared to be crumbling in ruins. On the outskirts of the city, a man was crying heavy tears as he buried his father. Plavachek approached him saying “God bless you, mournful grave digger!”

“May God grant that prayer, kind traveler,” the grave-digger replied, “where do you travel?”

And Plavachek Explained, “I am going to old Grandfather Know-it-all to get three of his golden hairs.”

At once, the poor grave-digger dried his eyes and began to smile. “To Grandfather Know-it-all you say! Oh, it's only a pity you didn't come sooner, for our king has been long awaiting a seeker such as you! I must bring you to him.”

So, the man brought Plavachek to the king of this city, which was in such a sorry state. And this king said to him, “You say you’re going to see Grandfather Know-it-all? Please, will you do us a favor? We have a well here that used to flow with the water of life. If anyone drank of it, no matter how sick he was, he would be well. But, sadly, for twenty years or so our well has gone dry. If you would ask Grandfather Know-it-all how to make the well run with the water of life once again, then I will reward you handsomely.” Again, Plavachek said that he was happy to do this favor, and then he set off again on his journey.

Onward our young Plavachek traveled, long and far, until he came to a black forest. Deep within the dark forest he went until he came upon a clearing where there was a wide green meadow full of beautiful flowers blooming in radiant colors. Plavachek was stunned by the beautiful view, but as he walked closer then he could not believe his eyes. Nestled in the center of the meadow appeared a golden palace that sparkled and shone as if it were on fire! He knew immediately that he had found the palace of Grandfather Know-it-all.

Plavachek did feel nervous, but he had come this far. So, he walked boldly up to the entrance and was surprised to see that there were no guards. He tried the knob, and to his shock, the doors swung open. Not knowing what else to do, Plavachek slowly entered the palace, and tiptoed through the place. It appeared completely empty... and then he saw a little old lady sitting quietly at her spinning wheel in the corner. “Well, hello there, Plavachek! I’m so happy to see you again and I have been expecting you,” the old woman said warmly.

Well, Plavachek was dumbfounded to see his godmother there! But, he found his voice and greeted her in return. “Godmother,” he started, “I am here on account of the king. He says that I cannot be his son-in-law for nothing, so I must give a dowry fit for a princess, and that only three golden hairs from Grandfather Know-it-all’s own head will suffice. What can I do?”

The old woman stopped her spinning, looked at her godson, and grinned brightly. “Plavachek, don't you know who Grandfather Know-it-all is? Why, he is the bright sun! He goes everywhere and sees everything. And, what you did not know is that I am his mother. In the morning when the day begins, my son is just a young boy. By noon he is a full-grown man. And when evening falls he has aged to an old grandfather. My dear boy, I will get you three of the golden hairs from his own golden head, or I am not a very good godmother! But, my dear, you must not remain out in the open where he can see you. My son is usually kind, but if he comes home from a day’s work hungry, then he might want to roast you and have you for his supper. There is an empty tub over there. Curl up on the floor and I will turn it over you so he will not know you are here.”

Plavachek did as he was told, but then he remembered the three questions that he promised to get answers about. Quickly, he lifted up the tub and told his grandmother the questions. “Yes, dear,” the old woman said, “I will ask my son for you, but you must listen carefully for his replies. Hush now!”

Suddenly there was the sound of a great wind, as if a tornado was outside the window! Plavachek quickly lowered the tub and remained very quiet. The Sun himself, who appeared just as she had said, as an old grandfather with a golden head, flew in by the western window. As soon as he entered he began to sniff the air suspiciously. “What is that stench?” he cried. “It smells of human flesh! Mother, do you have anyone here with you?” the old sun demanded.

“Oh, star of the day, who could I have anyone here without your seeing them?” she chuckled innocently. “My son, you have been flying all day long over the Earth and that is why your nose is filled with the smell of human flesh.” The old man seemed satisfied at that, and sat down to have his supper.

After he had eaten his fill. The old man laid down to sleep and rested his shining golden head upon his mother’s lap. Tired from a hard day’s work, the Sun was soon snoring. The old woman gently pulled out a golden hair from his head and tossed it on the floor. The hair twanged like the string of a violin as it popped out of his head. The sun awoke with a start, saying, “what is it, mother? What happened?”

“Nothing, my darling boy, it was nothing. I was asleep and I had a strange dream,” the old woman cuddled her son.

“What did you dream about, mother,” asked the Sun.

“I dreamt about a city where they had a well of living water. If anyone drank from this well, no matter how sick he was, he would get better. Even if he were dead already, just a sprinkle of this water would bring him back to life. And, for the last twenty years, this well has gone dry. Is there any way to make it flow with the water of life once again?”

Yawning, the Sun answered drowsily, “Yes, Mother, there is. There is a frog sitting on the spring that feeds the well. Let them kill the frog and clean out the well, and then the water of life will flow as before...” And then he drifted off back to sleep.

When he was snoring again, the old woman pulled out a second hair and threw it on the floor. Again, her son woke up saying, “what is it, mother?”

She answered him, “Nothing my dear boy, nothing. I just fell asleep again and had another strange dream. I dreamt of a city where they had an apple tree that bore the apples of youth. If anyone ate one of these apples, no matter how old they were, they would become young again. But, for twenty years, the tree has borne no fruit. Can anything make the tree bear the apples of youth again?”

And, again, the Sun knew the answer. Sleepily, he answered and said, “Yes, of course. In the roots of the tree there is a snake that takes all of the tree’s strength. If they would kill the snake and transplant the tree, then it will bear the apples of youth once more.”

The sentence trailed off as the Sun fell back asleep again. And, for a third time, the old woman plucked a golden hair from his head and tossed it upon the floor. This time, the Sun sat straight up and exclaimed “why won't you let me sleep, mother?!”

She reached for him and pulled him back to her lap stroking his hair gently, she said “Now, now, my boy, lie still. I’m sorry for waking you again, but I fell fast asleep and had another very strange dream of a boatman on the black sea. For twenty years he has been ferrying that boat back and forth and nobody has offered to relieve him of his duty. When will he be relieved?”

Nearly talking in his sleep now, the Sun said, “Oh the boatman is very silly, indeed! Why doesn't he just thrust the oar into the hands of someone else and jump ashore himself? Then the other man would have to be the ferryman instead.

But, please mother. Will you be quiet now? I must wake up very early tomorrow morning. For these past few days, every morning I must visit the king’s daughter to dry the tears she cries every night for her husband, the woodsman’s son, who her father sent away to get three of my golden hairs.” And with that he drifted off back to sleep.

Plavachek, too, fell asleep curled up beneath the tub on the floor of Grandfather Know-it-all’s palace. But, in the wee hours of the morning, there was again the sound of a mighty rushing of wind. Peeking out from under the rim of the tub, Plavachek saw that a beautiful golden child was waking from his slumber upon the old woman's lap. It was the glorious Sun, who had indeed, transformed back into a child over the night. The shining child said goodbye to his mother and flew out of the eastern window.

Now the old woman walked over to the tub and flipped it over to let Plavachek out. “Here are the three golden hairs for your dowry. And, if you were listening well, you also have Grandfather know-it-all's answers to your three questions. You best start your journey back home, for your wife is overwhelmed by worry for you. And, Plavachek, dear boy, you will now have no further need of my help, so you will never see me again. Goodbye, and good luck.”

Overwhelmed with gratitude, Plavachek embraced his grandmother and told her that she would always be in his heart. Then, he set off to return home to his wife.

Soon enough, Plavachek arrived in the first city on his return journey. He went straight to the king to give him Grandfather Know-it-all's answer. "Good king, I have news for you! Have the well cleaned and kill the frog that sits on its spring. If you do this, the water will flow again as it used to."

And so, the king ordered this to be done. Immediately, the water of life began to flow once again. The king was so grateful that he gave Plavachek a very rich reward of twelve beautiful horses who were as white as swans. All twelve horses were laden with as much gold and silver as they could carry. Plavachek thanked the king for his generosity and continued on his journey.

He came to the second city and, again, asked to be taken to the king. "Good king, I have good news for you! Have the apple tree dug up. You will find a snake gnawing at its roots. Kill the snake and replant the tree, and then it will bear the apples of youth once again." And so, the king ordered this to be done. The tree was replanted at dusk, and by dawn the next day the tree had burst into bloom with apple blossoms for the first time in twenty years. The king was so delighted that he gave Plavachek rewards of twelve horses who were as black as ravens. And, again, every horse was laden with as much treasure as it could carry.

And so, Plavachek continued his journey. He traveled on and on until he returned to the shores of the black sea. The tired ferryman's eyes lit up with hope when he saw Plavachek approaching. "Did you ask Grandfather Know-it-all my question?" he asked eagerly.

"Yes, I did," said Plavachek earnestly. "And, I will tell you the answer after you ferry me to the other side of this black sea." The boatman pressed him for his answer, but Plavachek was very firm that he would only tell him once he was safely on the other side. So, the old man ferried him and his twelve white horses and twelve black horses across the dark sea.

When they had landed and Plavachek stepped onto the dry land, he said to the ferryman, "I thank you for your service, and here is your answer. The next person who comes to be ferried over, thrust your oar into his hands and quickly jump onto the shore. Then the other man will have to be the ferryman in your place." The boatman was astounded that he had never thought of this himself, and thanked Plavachek for his insight.

Finally, Plavachek made it back home to the palace of the first king and to his princess bride. The nasty old king could barely believe his eyes when he saw the young man carrying the three long shining hairs of Grandfather Know-it-all, which sparkled and shone brightly. And, the young princess' eyes flowed with tears again with happiness at her bridegroom's return.

The king was astounded again when he saw the twelve white horses and the twelve black horses following Plavachek, all laden heavy with immense treasure. "Where on Earth did you get these gorgeous horses and all of this wealth, Plavachek?" the king could barely gasp out the words.

Plavachek held his head high and said proudly, "I have earned them on my journey." and, he told the tale of his travels.

“Apples of youth, you say! Water of life!” explained the king in wonder. And then he thought selfishly to himself “if I ate one of those apples, I would become young again! If I were dead, the water of life would restore me! And then I would never have to hand my kingdom over to this wretched peasant...” And, just like that, the wicked old king decided that he, too, would go on the very same journey.

The king set off at once to seek his own reward. And do you know what? He still has not come back! And so it was that Plavachek, the poor woodsman’s son, did become the king’s son-in-law just as the old Fate had divined. The queen insisted that Plavachek ruled the kingdom until the king returned. But, well, as for the king... it seems he is still ferrying that boat back and forth across the black sea! And Plavachek and his princess lived happily ever after.

THE END