

Tales & Legends of the Serbians

The Golden Haired Twins

Once upon a time, a long long while ago, there lived a young king who wished very much to marry, but could not decide where he had better look for a wife. One evening as he was walking disguised through the streets of his capital, as it was his frequent custom to do, he stopped to listen near a open window where he heard three young girls chatting gaily together. The girls were talking about a report which had been lately spread through the city, that the king intended soon to marry. One of the girls exclaimed: " If the king would marry me I would give him a son who should be the greatest hero in the world." The second girl said: "And if I were to be his wife I would present him with two sons at once - the twins with golden hair." And the third girl declared that were the king to marry *her*, she would give him a daughter so beautiful that there should not be her equal in the whole wide world! The young king listened to all this, and for sometime thought over their words, and tried to make up his mind which of the three girls he should choose for a wife. At last he decided that he would marry the one who had said she would bring him twins with golden hair. Having once settled this in his own mind, he ordered that all preparations for his marriage should be made forthwith, and shortly after when all was ready, he married the second girl of the three.

Several months after his marriage the young king, who was at war with one of the neighboring princes, received tidings of the defeat of his army, and heard that his presence was immediately required in the camp. He accordingly left his capital and went to his army, leaving the young queen in his palace to the care of his step-mother. Now the king's stepmother hated her daughter-in-law very much indeed, so when the young queen was near her confinement, the old queen told her that it was customary in the royal family for their heirs to the throne to be born in a garret. The young queen(who knew nothing about the customs in the royal families except what she had learnt from hearing or seeing since her marriage to the king) believed

implicitly what her mother-in-law told her, although she thought it a great pity to leave her splendid apartments and go up into a miserable attic.

Now when the golden-haired twins were born, the old queen contrived to steal them out of their cradle, and put in their place two ugly little dogs. She then caused the beautiful golden-haired boys to be buried alive in a remote spot in the palace gardens, and then sent the word to the king that the young queen had given him two little dogs instead of the heirs he was hoping for. The wicked stepmother said in her letter to the king that she herself was not surprised at this, though she was very sorry for his disappointment. As to herself, she had for a long time suspected the young queen of having too great a friendship for goblins and elves, and all kinds of evil spirits.

When the king received this letter, he fell into a frightful rage, because he had only married the young girl in order to have the golden-haired twins she had promised him as heirs to his throne. So he sent word back to the old queen that his wife should be put at once into the dampest dungeon in the castle, an order the wicked woman took good care to see carried out without delay. Accordingly the poor young queen was thrown into a miserably dark dungeon under the palace, and kept on bread and water.

The Plight of the Young Queen

Now there was only a very small hole in this prison - hardly enough to let in light and air - yet the old queen managed to cause a great many people to pass by this hole and whoever passed was ordered to spit at and abuse the unhappy young queen by calling out to her, "Are you really the queen? Are you the girl who cheated the king in order to be a queen? Where are your golden-haired twins? You cheated the king and your friends and now the witches have cheated you!" But the young king, though terribly angry and mortified at his great disappointment, was at the same time too sad and troubled to be willing to return to his palace. So he remained away for fully nine years. When he at last consented to return, the first thing he noticed in the palace gardens were two fine young trees, exactly the same size and shape. These trees had both golden leaves and golden blossoms, and had grown up of themselves from the very spot where the stepmother of the king had buried the two golden-haired boys she had stolen from their cradle.

The king admired these two trees exceedingly, and was never weary of looking at them. This, however, did not at all please the old queen, for she knew that the two young princes were buried just where the trees grew, and she always feared that by some means what she had done would come to the king's ears. She therefore pretended that she was very sick, and declared that she should die unless her stepson, the king, ordered the two golden-leaved trees to be cut down, and a bed be made for her out of their wood. As the king was not willing to be the cause of her death, he ordered that her wishes should be attended to, notwithstanding he was exceedingly sorry to lose his favorite trees. A bed was soon made from the two trees, and the seemingly sick old queen was laid on it as she desired. She was quite delighted that the golden-leaved trees had disappeared from the garden; but when midnight came, she could not sleep a bit, for it seemed to her that she heard the boards of which her bed was made in conversation with one another! At last it seemed to her, that one board said, quite plainly, "How are you my brother? And the other board answered: "Thank you, I am very well; How are you?" "Oh, I am all right," returned the first board; "but I wonder how our poor mother is in her dark dungeon! Perhaps she is hungry and thirsty!"

The wicked old queen could not sleep a minute all night, after hearing this conversation between the boards of her new bed; so next morning she got up very early and went to see the king. She thanked him for attending to her wish, and said she was already much better, but she felt quite sure she would never recover thoroughly unless the boards of her new bed were cut up and thrown into a fire. The king was sorry to lose entirely even the boards made out of his two favorite trees, nevertheless he could not refuse to use the means pointed out for his stepmother's perfect recovery. So the new bed was cut to pieces and thrown into the fire. But whilst the boards were blazing and crackling, two sparks from the fire flew into the courtyard, and in the next moment two beautiful lambs with golden fleeces and golden horns were seen gamboling about the yard. The king admired them greatly, and made many inquiries who had sent them there, and to whom they belonged. He even sent the public crier many times through the city, calling on the owners of the golden-fleeced lambs to appear and claim them; but no one came, so at length he thought he might fairly take them as his own property. The king took very great care of these two beautiful lambs, and every day directed that they should be well fed and attended to; this,

however, did not please his step-mother. She could not endure even to look on the lambs with their golden fleeces and golden horns, for they always reminded her of the golden-haired twins.

Again, the old queen later pretended to be dangerously ill, and declared she felt sure that she should soon die unless the two lambs were killed and cooked for her. The king was even fonder of his golden-fleeced lambs than he had been of the golden-leafed trees, but could not long resist the tears and prayers of the old queen, especially as she seemed to be very ill. Accordingly, the lambs were killed, and a servant was ordered to carry their golden fleeces down to the river and to wash the blood well out of them. But whilst the servant held them under the water, they slipped, in some way or other, out of his fingers and floated down the stream, which at that place flowed very rapidly. Now it happened that a hunter was passing near the river a little lower down, and, as he chanced to look in the water, he saw something strange in it. So he stepped into the stream, and soon fished out a small box which he carried into his house, and there opened it. To his unspeakably great surprise, he found in the box two golden-haired boys. Now the hunter had no children of his own; he therefore adopted the twins he had fished out of the river and brought them up just as if they had been his own sons. When the twins were grown up into handsome young men, one of them said to his foster-father, "Make us two suits of beggar's clothes and let us go and wander about the world!" The hunter replied and said: "No, I will have a fine suit made for each of you, such as is fitting for two such noble looking young men." But as the twins begged hard that he should not spend his money uselessly in buying fine clothes, telling him that they wished to travel about as beggars, the hunter - who always liked to do as his two handsome foster-sons wished - did as they desired and ordered two suit of clothes, like those worn by beggars, to be prepared for them. The two sons then dressed themselves up as beggars, and as well as they could hid their beautiful golden locks, and then set out to see the world. They took with them a gossle and cymbal, and maintained themselves with their singing and playing.

The King's Sons

They had wandered about in this way some time when one day they came to the king's palace. As the afternoon was already pretty far advanced, the

young musicians begged to allowed to pass the night in one of the out buildings belonging to the court, as they were poor men and quite strangers in the city. The old queen, however, who happened to be just then in the courtyard, saw them, and hearing their request said sharply that beggars could not be permitted to enter any part of the king's palace. The two travelers said they had hoped to pay for their night's lodging by their songs and music, as one of them played and sung to the goussle, and the other to the cymbal. The old queen, however, was not moved by this, but insisted on their going away at once. Happily for the two brothers, the king himself came out into the courtyard just as his stepmother angrily ordered them to go away, and at once directed his servants to find a place for the musicians to sleep in and ordered them to provide the two brothers with a good supper. After they supped, the king commanded them to be brought before him that he might judge of their skill as musicians, and that their singing might help him to pass the time more pleasantly. Accordingly, after the two young men had taken the refreshments provided for them, the servants took them into the king's presence, and they began to sing this ballad: -

"The pretty bird. the swallow, built her nest with care in the palace of the king. In the nest she reared up happily two of her little ones. A black, ugly-looking bird, however came to the swallow's nest to mar her happiness and to kill her two little ones. And the ugly bird succeeded in destroying the happiness of the poor little swallow; the little ones, however, although yet weak and unfledged were saved, and, when they were grown up and able to fly, they came to look at the palace where their mother, the pretty swallow, had built her nest."

This strange song the two minstrels sung so very sweetly that the king was quite charmed and asked them the meaning of the words. Whereupon the two meanly dressed young men took off their hats, so that the rich tresses of their golden hair fell down over their shoulders, and the light glanced so brightly upon it that the whole hall was illuminated by the shining. They then stepped forward together, and told the king all that had happened to them and to their mother, and convinced him that they were really his own sons. The king was exceedingly angry when he heard all of the cruel things his stepmother had done, and he gave orders that she should be burnt to death. He then went with the two golden-haired princes to the miserable dungeon wherein his unfortunate wife had been confined so many years, and brought

her once more into her beautiful palace. There, looking on her golden-haired sons, and seeing how much the king, their father, loved them, she soon forgot all her long years of misery. As to the king, he felt that he could never do enough to make amends for all the misfortunes his queen had lived through, and all the dangers to which his twin sons had been exposed. He felt that he had too easily believed the stories of the old queen, because he would not trouble himself to inquire more particularly into the truth or falsehood of the strange things she had told him. After all this mortification, and trouble, and misery, everything came right at last. So the king and his wife, with their golden-haired twins, lived together long and happily.