

Peter Amidon's synopsis of his telling of the Grimm's folktale 'Three Golden Hairs'

A peasant couple gives birth to a boy delivered by a midwife who foretells, based on the fact that the boy has a caul on his head, that the boy will marry the King's daughter when he is 14 years old.

A few months later the King, disguised as a wealthy merchant, travels through the town and, when he hears the news about a peasant boy who is supposed to marry his daughter, goes to visit the peasant couple.

The King, still acting the part of the wealthy merchant, convinces the peasant couple that if they give the child to him, the 'wealthy merchant' who knows the King, it was more likely that his fortune would come true.

The King takes the baby to a river, goes to another village and hires a carpenter to make a box with a lid, puts the baby in the box, hammers on the lid, and throws the boxed baby into the river.

A miller down the river pulls the box out and, since he and his wife had long wished for a child, adopt the baby and name him Jack.

Jack is a tall and strapping 14 years old, helping the miller in the mill, when the King happens to ride by and takes shelter from a rainstorm in the mill. The King asks about the miller's son, and, realizing that it is the same boy he threw in the river 14 years before, writes a letter for Jack to deliver to the Queen that the Queen should have Jack killed.

Jack takes a shortcut through the forest to the castle, but gets caught in the middle of the woods when night falls. Jack sees a cottage there in the forest and asks the woman he finds there if he can spend the night. She discourages him because it is a robbers' cottage, but he goes in and falls asleep on the floor. The robbers return and are distracted from their desire to rob or kill Jack by the letter sticking out of his pocket. The woman reads the letter to the robbers and they decide to play a trick on the King by writing a new letter that says that the Queen should marry Jack to their daughter.

Jack slept through all of this, and innocently delivers the changed letter to the Queen, who marries her daughter to Jack. The King returns to find Jack married to his daughter, and, after seeing the letter and hearing from Jack about the robbers, figured out that the letter must have been changed. So the King makes up a 'marriage test' that Jack must pass in order to remain married to the King's daughter: that Jack should go to the dark forest and get three golden hairs from the devil's head.

On the way to the dark forest, Jack passes a village whose guard tells him they have a fountain that used to overflow with wine but now is dried up, a village that had a tree that used to bear pears of solid gold but now is dying, and Jack takes a ride across a river with a ferryman who complains that he is stuck forever taking the ferry back and forth across the river.

Jack goes into the dark forest and finds the devil's house. He is greeted at the door by the Devil's mother who invites him in for milk and cookies. Jack asks the Devil's mother for help getting the three golden hairs from her son, and, even though she first warns him that he best leave since the Devil loves to eat human flesh, eventually agrees to help, and turns Jack into an ant, and tells him to crawl up into the folds of her dress. Jack does as she says, and suddenly remembers the problems of the two villages and the ferryman, and asks if she might help get him the answer to those three problems.

The Devil comes in, smells human flesh, and starts ransacking the house looking for the human. The Devil's mother warns him that if he does not stop messing up the house she will not pick lice out of his hair and sing to him, which she does.

The Devil falls asleep with his head in his mother's lap, and she pulls out one of his golden hairs. The Devil angrily awakes, but the mother apologizes, saying she just had a dream, a dream about a village with a fountain that no longer overflowed with wine. The Devil told her that the stupid villagers need only kill the toad at the bottom of the well.

The devil falls asleep twice more, both times to be angrily awakened when she pulls out his golden hairs, and each time responding to her 'dreams' with answers to the problems: the villagers of the second village only need to kill the rat at the roots of the golden pear tree, and the ferryman need only hand his pole to a passenger and jump off the ferry, and that passenger will then be the one stuck poling the ferry back and forth across the river.

Jack takes the three golden hairs back, and, on the way, relays the answers to the problems to the ferryman and the two villages. The villages each give him, in thanks, three donkeys each laden with sacks of gold.

Jack returns to the castle and gives the King the three golden hairs. The King sees the gold in the donkey sacks, and Jack tells him that 'there is a lot more where that came from', that the King need only go past two villages and across the river on the ferry; that the other side of the river is covered with gold.

The King immediately runs to get the gold: past the first village, past the second village, and orders the ferryman to take him across the river. Just before they get to the other side, the ferryman asks the King if he might hold the pole for a second. The King takes the pole, the ferryman jumps off the ferry, '...and as far as I know, the King is still stuck poling that ferry back and forth, back and forth across the river, to this very day.'