Legend

Just as every morning, an old fisherman Maciej went fishing in his battered wooden boat. It was moving slowly and with dignity on the calm surface of Lake Gopło. The sun was rising higher and higher. Kind-hearted Maciej had already cast the net for the third time but with no luck. Sad and waived man said to himself, “Damn it! What a day. It seems that I’ll have to go home empty-handed.” He was just about to return, when suddenly he noticed a strange glow right in the middle of the lake. The poor man got scared, but he didn’t row away. His inborn curiosity prevailed over his fear and old Maciej rowed out to the middle of the menacing lake. When he reached the place, he felt strange. An unknown power made him cast his net right in that spot, and so he did. When he tried to pull the net out, he said, “What on earth? A devil, or what? I can’t pull my net out.” At first he thought that it got caught on some under water limbs or an old sunken ship, one of many resting peacefully on the lake bed. He dug his feet into the ground, as despite his age and grey hair he was still a strong man, and he tugged at the net with such a force that he nearly tore it. He managed to pull it into the boat and what he saw in it surprised him. There was a gold king’s crown, a gold royal scepter and parchment scrolls heavily written on. Everything was covered with mud and entangled in waterweeds. The old fisherman put it all in a sac and went back home, completely scared. The evening had come before he pulled himself together completely. He put two logs into the fire he was sitting by cooking fish, and he started examining the treasures he had fished out. The old fisherman was neither greedy nor desirous of wealth, therefore the parchment scrolls with neat ancient writing aroused his interest the most. Maciej started reading slowly in a low voice…

Once upon a time, when a castle and a town called Kruszwica towered over Lake Goplo, and when Gopło was surrounded by impenetrable wilderness full of game and its clear deep water abounded in various species of fish and waterfowl, this horrifying story happened… Cruel and unjust was the regime of King Popiel, who was ruling his land with an iron hand. He had taken a haughty and greedy German princess Rycheza to be his wife. She was a beautiful woman, but she had a heart of stone and she craved power more than anything. She was a bad influence on the king. She could not accept that the king was unable to rule by himself, but as an

time-honoured custom said he had to listen to the Council of the Elders. Members of the Council were his uncles and righteous representatives of great families. “This is unbelievable that such a great ruler like you, my dear Popiel, has to listen to those old fools,” Rycheza spewed venom into the king’s heart. “There are no such customs on the German courts. Before I married you, I had been told that you were the only true ruler here.” Listening to his wife’s insinuations, Popiel ceased summoning the Council and chased the Elders from the court. He and his wife were contriving a plan how to get rid of them once and for all. Members of the Council were offended by the king because he had broken an ancient Slavic law. They became distrustful of him and stopped any contact. Popiel was afraid that his uncles would gather troops and attack the castle, hence he sent a messenger to wile them to the castle. “I invite you, my honour uncles, and I bow to you,” the messenger said on behalf of Popiel. “Forgive me for breaking ancient laws and come to my feast. May the harmony reign among us again.” The uncles forgave and forgot the insult, and beguiled with the good word, they hurried to the castle. It was a great feast. Tables were piled with food, plates were full of fish and game, goblets were overflowing with mead and unleavened beer. When the feast could not be better, Popiel took the floor, “Forgive me my fellow countrymen for my actions. As a peace sign, let’s drink this mead from faraway lands.” “Cheers! Long live the king!” the uncles shouted. The queen herself went to the cellar for the mead, as she had sent the servants away and started waiting at the table with a cunning smile. All guests were in their cups when Rycheza brought the best beverage. She was watching carefully if everyone drunk their toast. In the commotion and amusement, nobody noticed that neither the king nor the queen were drinking the mead; however, they were eagerly encouraging the others to propose toasts. Suddenly, one of the relatives stood up as he wanted to give a speech, but he dropped his cup and the mead spilt all over the floor. He held his stomach and shouted, “Betrayal! Betrayal! We have been poisoned!” The elders started falling off their benches holding their stomachs, struggling to catch a breath. “Be damned, Popiel! You and your family!,” they were shouting. „May your death be more cruel than ours!” When all screams died away and there was not a soul alive, Rycheza and her husband carried the bodies away and threw them to Gopło. Popiel had broken another law by not burying his relatives. Soon enough, all people in Kruszwica started whispering among one another about a strange disappearance of Popiel’s uncles. “There must be a dark secret behind it,” people were talking. “Nobody left the castle alive. It will end badly. Gods will punish the royal family severely.” A month had not passed by

since the fatal night, before one morning frightened Popiel ran into Recheza's chamber shouting, "It has happened! Mice! Mice everywhere! The curse of the uncles is fulfilling! We are damned!" Strange mice they were - their eyes were red, their teeth were sharp and oddly big, and they were not scared of people at all. They were everywhere, running around the castle and destroying everything in their way. Even killing them did not help, as more and more of the little rodents were coming out of the lake, where they bred from the corpses of the slaughtered uncles. Popiel got scared to death; he nearly lost his mind. He and his wife got on a boat and started rowing as fast as they could. They were going to a tall tower on an island to look for shelter there. When they reached the land, they ran into the tower and climbed to the top when suddenly Popiel shouted, "Good heavens! It cannot be, mice have just swum the lake and they are climbing the outside walls of the tower; we are dead. Be damned, Rycheza. Why did I listen to your fiendish advice?!" Horrible was their punishment for murdering their relatives. Popiel's family died out and the tower started to be called the Mouse Tower. Till these days, it is not known what has happened with the crown and the scepter which Popiel dropped in the lake while his escape. They are said to bring good luck to the one who will find them….

Having read the last scroll, old kind-hearted Maciej smiled to himself and got lost in his thoughts. He took the crown and scepter to his hand and clenched his teeth on a wooden pipe he was smoking, and he went silent for a very long time. What happened next? Nobody knows. Local people say that the old fisherman threw the treasure back into Gopło and who knows… Maybe someday someone will find it again…