

The Witch

By Unknown

There once lived an old couple who had one son called Ivashko; no one can tell how fond they were of him!

Well, one day, Ivashko said to his father and mother:

‘I’ll go out fishing if you’ll let me.’

‘What are you thinking about! you’re still very small; suppose you get drowned, what good will there be in that?’

‘No, no, I shan’t get drowned. I’ll catch you some fish; do let me go!’

So his mother put a white shirt on him, tied a red girdle round him, and let him go. Out in a boat he sat and said

Canoe, canoe, float a little farther,
Canoe, canoe, float a little farther!

Then the canoe floated on farther and farther, and Ivashko began to fish. When some little time had passed by, the old woman hobbled down to the river side and called to her son:

Ivashechko, Ivashechko, my boy,
Float up, float up unto the waterside
I bring thee food and drink.

And Ivashko said:

Canoe, canoe, float to the waterside
That is my mother calling me.

The boat floated to the shore: the woman took the fish, gave her boy food and drink, changed his shirt for him and his girdle, and sent him back to his fishing. Again he sat in his boat and said:

Canoe, canoe, float a little farther,
Canoe, canoe, float a little farther.

Then the canoe floated on farther and farther, and Ivashko began to fish. After a little time had passed by, the old man .also hobbled down to the bank and called to his son:

Ivashechko, Ivashechko, my boy,
Float up, float up, unto the waterside;
I bring thee food and drink.

And Ivashko replied:

Canoe, canoe, float to the waterside;
That is my father calling me.

The canoe floated to the shore. The old man took the fish, gave his boy food and drink, changed his shirt for him and his girdle, and sent him back to his fishing.

Now a certain witch had heard what Ivashko's parents had cried aloud to him, and she longed to get hold of the boy. So she went down to the bank and cried with a hoarse voice:

Ivashechko, Ivashechko, my boy,
Float up, float up, unto the waterside;
I bring thee food and drink.

Ivashko perceived that the voice was not his mother's, but was that of a witch, and he sang:

Canoe, canoe, float a little farther,
Canoe, canoe, float a little farther;
That is not my mother, but a witch who calls me.

The witch saw that she must call Ivashko with just such a voice as his mother had.

So she hastened to a smith and said to him:

'Smith, smith I make me just such a thin little voice as Ivashko's mother has: if you don't, I'll eat you.' So the smith forged her a little voice just like Ivashko's mother's. Then the witch went down by night to the shore and sang:

Ivashechko, Ivashechko, my boy,
Float up, float up, unto the waterside;
I bring thee food and drink.

Ivashko came, and she took the fish, and seized the boy and carried him home with her. When she arrived she said to her daughter Alenka, 'Heat the stove as hot as you can, and bake Ivashko well, while I go and collect my friends for the feast.' So Alenka heated the stove hot, ever so hot, and said to Ivashko,

'Come here and sit on this shovel!'

'I'm still very young and foolish,' answered Ivashko: 'I haven't yet quite got my wits about me. Please teach me how one ought to sit on a shovel.'

'Very good,' said Alenka; 'it won't take long to teach you.'

But the moment she sat down on the shovel, Ivashko instantly pitched her into the oven, slammed to the iron plate in front of it, ran out of the hut, shut the door, and hurriedly climbed up ever so high an oak-tree [which stood close by].

Presently the witch arrived with her guests and knocked at the door of the hut. But nobody opened it for her.

'Ah! that cursed Alenka!' she cried. 'No doubt she's gone off somewhere to amuse herself.' Then she slipped in through the window, opened the door, and let in her guests.

They all sat down to table, and the witch opened the oven, took out Alenka's baked body, and served it up. They all ate their fill and drank their fill, and then they went out into the courtyard and began rolling about on the grass.

'I turn about, I roll about, having fed on Ivashko's flesh!' cried the witch. 'I turn about, I roll about, having fed on Ivashko's flesh.'

But Ivashko called out to her from the top of the oak:

'Turn about, roll about, having fed on Alenka's flesh!'

'Did I hear something?' said the witch. 'No it was only the noise of the leaves.' Again the witch began:

'I turn about, I roll about, having fed on Ivashko's flesh!'

And Ivashko repeated:

'Turn about, roll about, having fed on Alenka's flesh!'

Then the witch looked up and saw Ivashko, and immediately rushed at the oak on which Ivashko was seated, and began to gnaw away at it. And she gnawed, and gnawed, and gnawed, until at last she smashed two front teeth. Then she ran to a forge, and when she reached it she cried, 'Smith, smith! make me some iron teeth; if you don't, I'll eat you!'

So the smith forged her two iron teeth.

The witch returned and began gnawing the oak again.

She gnawed, and gnawed, and was just on the point of gnawing it through, when Ivashko jumped out of it into another tree which stood beside it. The oak that the witch had gnawed through fell down to the ground; but then she saw that Ivashko was sitting up in another tree, so she gnashed her teeth with spite and set to work afresh, to gnaw that tree also. She gnawed, and gnawed, and gnawed—broke two lower teeth, and ran off to the forge.

'Smith, smith!' she cried when she got there, 'make me some iron teeth; if you don't I'll eat you!'

The smith forged two more iron teeth for her. She went back again, and once more began to gnaw the oak.

Ivashko didn't know what he was to do now. He looked out, and saw that swans and geese were flying by, so he called to them imploringly:

Oh, my swans and geese,
Take me on your pinions,
Bear me to my father and my mother,
To the cottage of my father and my mother,
There to eat, and drink, and live in comfort.

'Let those in the centre carry you,' said the birds. Ivashko waited; a second flock flew past, and he again cried imploringly:

Oh, my swans and geese!
Take me on your pinions,
Bear me to my father and my mother,
To the cottage of my father and my mother,
There to eat, and drink, and live in comfort.

‘Let those in the rear carry you!’ said the birds. Again Ivashko waited. A third flock came flying up, and he cried:

Oh, my swans and geese!
Take me on your pinions,
Bear me to my father and my mother,
To the cottage of my father and my mother.
There to eat, and drink, and live in comfort.

And those swans and geese took hold of him and carried him back, flew up to the cottage, and dropped him in the upper room.

Early the next morning his mother set to work to bake pan.cakes, baked them, and all of a sudden fell to thinking about her boy. ‘Where is my Ivashko?’ she cried; ‘would that I could see him, were it only in a dream!’

Then his father said, ‘I dreamed that swans and geese had brought our Ivashko home on their wings.’

And when she had finished baking the pancakes, she said, “Now then, old man, let’s divide the cakes: there’s for you, father! there’s for me! There’s for you, father! there’s for me.’

‘And none for me?’ called out Ivashko.

‘There’s for you, father!’ went on the old woman, ‘there’s for me.’

‘And none for me!’ [repeated the boy.]

‘Why, old man,’ said the wife, ‘go and see whatever that is up there.’

The father climbed into the upper room and there he found Ivashko. The old people were delighted, and asked their boy about everything that had happened. And after that he and they lived on happily together.