

The Folk- and Fairy-Tales of Ludwig Bechstein: **Of the Boy who Wanted to Learn Witchcraft**

Once upon a time there was a boy who had heard a great deal about witchcraft and was keen to learn it. However, everyone he asked about this told him that they did not know and could not practice that art, and they also did not want to know anything about it. So the boy went into a dark forest all alone and cried out, more than once, in a very loud voice: “Who will teach me the craft of witches?” – and from several parts of the deep forest the echo rang like an answer: “Witches! Witches!”

And after a while an ancient little woman came creeping through the bushes who had not a tooth left in her mouth, and whose eyes were terribly red. Her back was bent, her hair was white, and it hung down wildly all around her head and blew about in the wind. Her voice sounded like the voice of the Little Owl when he calls, “Come along!” and just so did the old woman call to the boy; and she signalled him to follow, she would teach him witchcraft. The boy followed her and she led him ever deeper into the forest and finally onto a marshy alder moor, where there was a grey, unprepossessing, dilapidated forest-hut. The walls were built of peat sods and papered with



moss; the roof was covered with reeds. In the forest-hut there was no one but a pretty young girl who was called Liese, but the old woman did not say if she were her daughter or her granddaughter; apart from her, there were only three large toads inside, and over the low stove there hung a cauldron with a soup bubbling inside, which looked like goose-giblets cooked in blood, or jugged hare, or some other blood soup including meat bones. The old woman placed one toad before the threshold to stand guard, the second toad she sent up to the loft to prepare a bed for the boy, and the third toad she placed on the table to give light. This toad did its best to shine, but however hard its eyes blazed with a greenish glow, it still barely managed to shine as brightly as a glow-worm – whence comes the hatred that the toads feel for the glow-worms. Now the old woman and Liese ate their evening meal from the cauldron, and the boy was supposed to eat also, but he shuddered at the thought, for it seemed to him that the bones were the fingers and toes of children. He complained of being very tired, and he was directed to his straw-bed, where he soon fell asleep with the thought that his apprenticeship in witchcraft would begin on the next morning, and it would be very nice if little Liese were to give him instruction in it. But the old witch whispered to the girl, “Another one caught! A fine roast – tomorrow, wake me first thing, before the sun rises, then we’ll slaughter him, and what we don’t roast at once, we can salt.”

Now the two of them also went to bed, but Liese found no sleep, she felt so very sorry for the handsome boy because he too was to die; and she got up from her bed and walked to his, and saw how beautifully red his little cheeks were, and how blond his curly hair – and his eyes being as blue as

forget-me-nots, Liese had not forgotten that. And she was appalled at herself, for being compelled to serve the evil old witch who had, long ago, when she was just a very little girl, abducted her from her parents and dragged her into the depths of the forest; and she had been made to learn witchery, how to dart through the air as fast as an arrow, how to make yourself invisible, how to turn yourself into other forms – and now, as Liese's heart was stirred with affection for the boy, the girl decided to save him if possible. So she woke him very quietly and whispered to him, "Dear boy, rise and follow me! Here only death awaits you."



"Am I not then to learn witchcraft here?" asked the boy, whose name was Friedel.

"It's better for you never to learn it; besides, you have time enough for that yet," replied Liese. "Do not tarry now – flee, and I'll flee with you."

"I'll happily go with you, dear girl," said the boy, "and I do not want to stay with the ugly old woman and her nasty toads."

"Then come!" said Liese, and she softly opened the door and had a look to see if the old woman was sleeping – she was asleep, for it was but midnight and long before daybreak.

Now Liese walked out of the house with Friedel, and she spat on the

threshold, after which they both hurried away from that place. However, the opening and closing of the door had produced a slight noise, and old people being very light sleepers, the witch awoke and called, "Liese! Get up! I think it will soon be day." Then the spittle on the threshold cried, by means of a witch's spell that Liese had laid, "I'm already up! Just rest awhile until I've swept the hut and gathered wood and leaves for the fire." Now the old woman lay in bed a while longer, while the fugitives hurried away without stopping; but she could not get back to sleep and called out once again, "Liese, is the fire burning?"

Once again, the spittle on the threshold answered, "It isn't burning yet; the leaves are damp – the wood is smoking – just rest a while longer until I've blown up the fire."

The old woman rested a short time longer, while the fugitives put ever more distance between themselves and her hut. In the meantime the sun rose, and the old woman, who had nodded off a little, jumped out of bed with both feet at once and shouted, "Child of Satan! The sun is rising and you have not woken me. Where have you got to?"

The old woman received no answer to this question, for the sun had dried up the spittle on the threshold, and now the witch went through the house like a whirlwind. The boy was gone, and Liese was gone, and the hut was not swept, there were no leaves, no wood on the stove. The old woman was furious. She grabbed a broomstick and ran out of the house. She struck the door with the broom and the house became invisible; she stepped on a puffball, and a cloud swelled up; then she sat down on her broomstick and rose up into the air as a cloud. Soon she saw which

direction the fugitives were fleeing in, and the cloud flew after them with the speed of the wind. But Liese was constantly looking round while she fled, for she knew the arts of the old witch, and she now said to Friedel: "You see the brown cloud there, high up in the sky? That's the witch following us – we can flee no further; she will soon catch us up. Now let me use my skill. I will become a thornbush and bear you as a sloe." Suddenly Liese was a blackthorn, bearing an abundance of fruit and growing on a slope, and the lowest berry of all, that was Friedel.

The witch became very thirsty on her journey through the air, and when she saw the blackthorn bush filled with fruit, she said to herself: "The air is dry and saps your strength – I must descend and eat a sloe or two." – And that is what she did, picking one berry after another, and she said: "A sharp and sour bite / Whets your appetite." Now the berries had all been consumed down to the last one, which was Friedel, and the evil old woman knew this fine well; she clawed at it repeatedly, and the thornbush gave her long, skinny fingers a good pricking – however, she did not mind this, but did her utmost to grab the last sloe, completely concealed in thorns though it was; and then the sloe fell off and rolled down the slope, and the thornbush suddenly became a lake, and the berry a small drake, all through Liese's magic arts which she had learned from the old woman. Then the witch threw one of her slippers into the air and it instantly became a large bird of prey which swooped down on the drake; the latter quickly dived under, and the moment the bird of prey's beak touched the water a wave rose up which caught and drowned it, whereupon the drake came back to the surface. Furiously, the old woman threw her second slipper into the

water and it became a crocodile and shot towards the drake to snap it up; then the drake flew up into the air and alighted on another part of the lake, but the water which flowed into the crocodile's jaws turned to stone, and the crocodile became so heavy that it sank straight down. Now the old witch lay down flat at the water's edge, intending to drink it up, for without the lake the enchanted drake would be stranded. The moment he touched the land, this drake would have to reassume his original form. But the old woman had not been drinking long when the water in her body turned into fire, and then there was a bang, as loud as if Hell were exploding. The witch had burst, the drake was the handsome boy again, the fire became Liese, and then the two of them plighted their troth. When the boy asked Liese if she would teach him witchcraft, she laughed and said, "Why, you know it already – you've bewitched me, haven't you?"