



# *Baba Yaga (Arthur Ransome version)*

Brothers Grimm

Russian

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*Easy*  
*21 min read*

“Tell us about Baba Yaga,” begged Maroosia.

“Yes,” said Vanya, “please, grandfather, and about the little hut on hen’s legs.”

“Baba Yaga is a witch,” said old Peter; “a terrible old woman she is, but sometimes kind enough. You know it was she who told Prince Ivan how to win one of the daughters of the Tzar of the Sea, and that was the best daughter of the bunch, Vasilissa the Very Wise. But then Baba Yaga is usually bad, as in the case of Vasilissa the Very Beautiful, who was only saved from her iron teeth by the cleverness of her Magic Doll.”

“Tell us the story of the Magic Doll,” begged Maroosia.

“I will some day,” said old Peter.

“And has Baba Yaga really got iron teeth?” asked Vanya.

“Iron, like the poker and tongs,” said old Peter.

“What for?” said Maroosia.

“To eat up little Russian children,” said old Peter, “when she can get them. She usually only eats bad ones, because the good ones get away. She is bony all over, and her eyes flash, and she drives about in a mortar, beating it with a pestle, and sweeping up her tracks with a besom, so that you cannot tell which way she has gone.”

“And her hut?” said Vanya. He had often heard about it before, but he wanted to hear about it again.

“She lives in a little hut which stands on hen’s legs. Sometimes it faces the forest, sometimes it faces the path, and sometimes it walks solemnly about. But in some of the stories she lives in another kind of hut, with a railing of tall sticks, and a skull on each stick. And all night long fire glows in the skulls and fades as the dawn rises.”

“Now tell us one of the Baba Yaga stories,” said Maroosia.

“Please,” said Vanya.

“I will tell you how one little girl got away from her, and then, if ever she catches you, you will know exactly what to do.”

And old Peter put down his pipe and began:—

Baba Yaga and the little girl with the kind heart.

Once upon a time there was a widowed old man who lived alone in a hut with his little daughter. Very merry they were together, and they used to smile at each other over a table just piled with bread and jam. Everything went well, until the old man took it into his head to marry again.

Yes, the old man became foolish in the years of his old age, and he took another wife. And so the poor little girl had a stepmother. And after that everything changed. There was no more bread and jam on the table, and no more playing bo-peep, first this side of the samovar and then that, as she sat with her father at tea. It was worse than that, for she never did sit at tea. The stepmother said that everything that went wrong was the little girl’s fault. And the old man believed his new wife, and so there were no more kind words for his little

daughter. Day after day the stepmother used to say that the little girl was too naughty to sit at table. And then she would throw her a crust and tell her to get out of the hut and go and eat it somewhere else.

And the poor little girl used to go away by herself into the shed in the yard, and wet the dry crust with her tears, and eat it all alone. Ah me! she often wept for the old days, and she often wept at the thought of the days that were to come.

Mostly she wept because she was all alone, until one day she found a little friend in the shed. She was hunched up in a corner of the shed, eating her crust and crying bitterly, when she heard a little noise. It was like this: scratch—scratch. It was just that, a little gray mouse who lived in a hole.

Out he came, his little pointed nose and his long whiskers, his little round ears and his bright eyes. Out came his little humpy body and his long tail. And then he sat up on his hind legs, and curled his tail twice round himself and looked at the little girl.

The little girl, who had a kind heart, forgot all her sorrows, and took a scrap of her crust and threw it to the little mouse. The mouseykin nibbled and nibbled, and there, it was gone, and he was looking for another. She gave him another bit, and presently that was gone, and another and another, until there was no crust left for the little girl. Well, she didn't mind that. You see, she was so happy seeing the little mouse nibbling and nibbling.

When the crust was done the mouseykin looks up at her with his little bright eyes, and "Thank you," he says, in a little squeaky voice. "Thank you," he says; "you are a kind little girl, and I am only a mouse, and I've eaten all your crust. But there is one thing I can do for you, and that is to tell you to take care. The old woman in the hut (and that was the cruel stepmother) is own sister to Baba Yaga, the bony-legged, the witch. So if ever she sends you on a message to your aunt, you come and tell me. For Baba Yaga would eat you soon enough with her iron teeth if you did not know what to do."

"Oh, thank you," said the little girl; and just then she heard the stepmother calling to her to come in and clean up the tea things, and tidy the house, and brush out the floor, and clean everybody's boots.

So off she had to go.

When she went in she had a good look at her stepmother, and sure enough she had a long nose, and she was as bony as a fish with all the flesh picked off, and the little girl thought of Baba Yaga and shivered, though she did not feel so bad when she remembered the mouseykin out there in the shed in the yard.

The very next morning it happened. The old man went off to pay a visit to some friends of his in the next village, just as I go off sometimes to see old Fedor, God be with him. And as soon as the old man was out of sight the wicked stepmother called the little girl.

“You are to go to-day to your dear little aunt in the forest,” says she, “and ask her for a needle and thread to mend a shirt.”

“But here is a needle and thread,” says the little girl.

“Hold your tongue,” says the stepmother, and she gnashes her teeth, and they make a noise like clattering tongs. “Hold your tongue,” she says. “Didn’t I tell you you are to go to-day to your dear little aunt to ask for a needle and thread to mend a shirt?”

“How shall I find her?” says the little girl, nearly ready to cry, for she knew that her aunt was Baba Yaga, the bony-legged, the witch.

The stepmother took hold of the little girl’s nose and pinched it.

“That is your nose,” she says. “Can you feel it?”

“Yes,” says the poor little girl.

“You must go along the road into the forest till you come to a fallen tree; then you must turn to your left, and then follow your nose and you will find her,” says the stepmother. “Now, be off with you, lazy one. Here is some food for you to eat by the way.” She gave the little girl a bundle wrapped up in a towel.

The little girl wanted to go into the shed to tell the mouseykin she was going to Baba Yaga, and to ask what she should do. But she looked back, and there was the stepmother at the door watching her. So she had to go straight on.

She walked along the road through the forest till she came to the fallen tree. Then she turned to the left. Her nose was still hurting where the stepmother had pinched it, so she knew she had to go straight ahead. She was just setting out when she heard a little noise under the fallen tree. “Scratch—scratch.”

And out jumped the little mouse, and sat up in the road in front of her.

“O mouseykin, mouseykin,” says the little girl, “my stepmother has sent me to her sister. And that is Baba Yaga, the bony-legged, the witch, and I do not know what to do.”

“It will not be difficult,” says the little mouse, “because of your kind heart. Take all the things you find in the road, and do with them what you like. Then you will escape from Baba Yaga, and everything will be well.”

“Are you hungry, mouseykin?” said the little girl

“I could nibble, I think,” says the little mouse.

The little girl unfastened the towel, and there was nothing in it but stones. That was what the stepmother had given the little girl to eat by the way.

“Oh, I’m so sorry,” says the little girl. “There’s nothing for you to eat.”

“Isn’t there?” said mouseykin, and as she looked at them the little girl saw the stones turn to bread and jam. The little girl sat down on the fallen tree, and the little mouse sat beside her, and they ate bread and jam until they were not hungry any more.

“Keep the towel,” says the little mouse; “I think it will be useful. And remember what I said about the things you find on the way. And now good-bye,” says he.

“Good-bye,” says the little girl, and runs along.

As she was running along she found a nice new handkerchief lying in the road. She picked it up and took it with her. Then she found a little bottle of oil. She picked it up and took it with her. Then she found some scraps of meat.

“Perhaps I’d better take them too,” she said; and she took them.

Then she found a gay blue ribbon, and she took that. Then she found a little loaf of good bread, and she took that too.

“I daresay somebody will like it,” she said.

And then she came to the hut of Baba Yaga, the bony-legged, the witch. There was a high fence round it with big gates. When she pushed them open they squeaked miserably, as if it hurt them to move. The little girl was sorry for them.

“How lucky,” she says, “that I picked up the bottle of oil!” and she poured the oil into the hinges of the gates.

Inside the railing was Baba Yaga’s hut, and it stood on hen’s legs and walked about the yard. And in the yard there was standing Baba Yaga’s servant, and she was crying bitterly because of the tasks Baba Yaga set her to do. She was crying bitterly and wiping her eyes on her petticoat.

“How lucky,” says the little girl, “that I picked up a handkerchief!” And she gave the handkerchief to Baba Yaga’s servant, who wiped her eyes on it and smiled through her tears.

Close by the hut was a huge dog, very thin, gnawing a dry crust.

“How lucky,” says the little girl, “that I picked up a loaf!” And she gave the loaf to the dog, and he gobbled it up and licked his lips.

The little girl went bravely up to the hut and knocked on the door.

“Come in,” says Baba Yaga.

The little girl went in, and there was Baba Yaga, the bony-legged, the witch, sitting weaving at a loom. In a corner of the hut was a thin black cat watching a mouse-hole.

“Good-day to you, auntie,” says the little girl, trying not to tremble.

“Good-day to you, niece,” says Baba Yaga.

“My stepmother has sent me to you to ask for a needle and thread to mend a shirt.”

“Very well,” says Baba Yaga, smiling, and showing her iron teeth. “You sit down here at the loom, and go on with my weaving, while I go and get you the needle and thread.”

The little girl sat down at the loom and began to weave.

Baba Yaga went out and called to her servant, “Go, make the bath hot and scrub my niece. Scrub her clean. I’ll make a dainty meal of her.”

The servant came in for the jug. The little girl begged her, “Be not too quick in making the fire, and carry the water in a sieve.” The servant smiled, but said nothing, because she was afraid of Baba Yaga. But she took a very long time about getting the bath ready.

Baba Yaga came to the window and asked,—

“Are you weaving, little niece? Are you weaving, my pretty?”

“I am weaving, auntie,” says the little girl.

When Baba Yaga went away from the window, the little girl spoke to the thin black cat who was watching the mouse-hole.

“What are you doing, thin black cat?”

“Watching for a mouse,” says the thin black cat. “I haven’t had any dinner for three days.”

“How lucky,” says the little girl, “that I picked up the scraps of meat!” And she gave them to the thin black cat.

The thin black cat gobbled them up, and said to the little girl,—

“Little girl, do you want to get out of this?”

“Catkin dear,” says the little girl, “I do want to get out of this, for Baba Yaga is going to eat me with her iron teeth.”

“Well,” says the cat, “I will help you.”

Just then Baba Yaga came to the window.

“Are you weaving, little niece?” she asked. “Are you weaving, my pretty?”

“I am weaving, auntie,” says the little girl, working away, while the loom went clickety clack, clickety clack.

Baba Yaga went away.

Says the thin black cat to the little girl: “You have a comb in your hair, and you have a towel. Take them and run for it while Baba Yaga is in the bath-house. When Baba Yaga chases after you, you must listen; and when she is close to you, throw away the towel, and it will turn into a big, wide river. It will take her a little time to get over that. But when she does, you must listen; and as soon as she is close to you throw away the comb, and it will sprout up into such a forest that she will never get through it at all.”

“But she’ll hear the loom stop,” says the little girl.

“I’ll see to that,” says the thin black cat.

The cat took the little girl’s place at the loom.

Clickety clack, clickety clack; the loom never stopped for a moment.

The little girl looked to see that Baba Yaga was in the bath-house, and then she jumped down from the little hut on hen’s legs, and ran to the gates as fast as her legs could flicker.

The big dog leapt up to tear her to pieces. Just as he was going to spring on her he saw who she was.

“Why, this is the little girl who gave me the loaf,” says he. “A good journey to you, little girl;” and he lay down again with his head between his paws.

When she came to the gates they opened quietly, quietly, without making any noise at all, because of the oil she

had poured into their hinges.

Outside the gates there was a little birch tree that beat her in the eyes so that she could not go by.

“How lucky,” says the little girl, “that I picked up the ribbon!” And she tied up the birch tree with the pretty blue ribbon. And the birch tree was so pleased with the ribbon that it stood still, admiring itself, and let the little girl go by.

How she did run!

Meanwhile the thin black cat sat at the loom. Clickety clack, clickety clack, sang the loom; but you never saw such a tangle as the tangle made by the thin black cat.

And presently Baba Yaga came to the window.

“Are you weaving, little niece?” she asked. “Are you weaving, my pretty?”

“I am weaving, auntie,” says the thin black cat, tangling and tangling, while the loom went clickety clack, clickety clack.

“That’s not the voice of my little dinner,” says Baba Yaga, and she jumped into the hut, gnashing her iron teeth; and there was no little girl, but only the thin black cat, sitting at the loom, tangling and tangling the threads.

“Grr,” says Baba Yaga, and jumps for the cat, and begins banging it about. “Why didn’t you tear the little girl’s eyes out?”

“In all the years I have served you,” says the cat, “you have only given me one little bone; but the kind little girl gave me scraps of meat.”

Baba Yaga threw the cat into a corner, and went out into the yard.

“Why didn’t you squeak when she opened you?” she asked the gates.

“Why didn’t you tear her to pieces?” she asked the dog.

“Why didn’t you beat her in the face, and not let her go by?” she asked the birch tree.

“Why were you so long in getting the bath ready? If you had been quicker, she never would have got away,” said Baba Yaga to the servant.

And she rushed about the yard, beating them all, and scolding at the top of her voice.

“Ah!” said the gates, “in all the years we have served you, you never even eased us with water; but the kind little girl poured good oil into our hinges.”

“Ah!” said the dog, “in all the years I’ve served you, you never threw me anything but burnt crusts; but the kind little girl gave me a good loaf.”

“Ah!” said the little birch tree, “in all the years I’ve served you, you never tied me up, even with thread; but the kind little girl tied me up with a gay blue ribbon.”

“Ah!” said the servant, “in all the years I’ve served you, you have never given me even a rag; but the kind little girl gave me a pretty handkerchief.”

Baba Yaga gnashed at them with her iron teeth. Then she jumped into the mortar and sat down. She drove it along with the pestle, and swept up her tracks with a besom, and flew off in pursuit of the little girl.

The little girl ran and ran. She put her ear to the ground and listened. Bang, bang, bangety bang! she could hear Baba Yaga beating the mortar with the pestle. Baba Yaga was quite close. There she was, beating with the pestle and sweeping with the besom, coming along the road.

As quickly as she could, the little girl took out the towel and threw it on the ground. And the towel grew bigger and bigger, and wetter and wetter, and there was a deep, broad river between Baba Yaga and the little girl.

The little girl turned and ran on. How she ran!

Baba Yaga came flying up in the mortar. But the mortar could not float in the river with Baba Yaga inside. She drove it in, but only got wet for her trouble. Tongs and pokers tumbling down a chimney are nothing to the noise she made as she gnashed her iron teeth. She turned home, and went flying back to the little hut on hen’s

legs. Then she got together all her cattle and drove them to the river.

“Drink, drink!” she screamed at them; and the cattle drank up all the river to the last drop. And Baba Yaga, sitting in the mortar, drove it with the pestle, and swept up her tracks with the besom, and flew over the dry bed of the river and on in pursuit of the little girl.

The little girl put her ear to the ground and listened. Bang, bang, bangety bang! She could hear Baba Yaga beating the mortar with the pestle. Nearer and nearer came the noise, and there was Baba Yaga, beating with the pestle and sweeping with the besom, coming along the road close behind.

The little girl threw down the comb, and grew bigger and bigger, and its teeth sprouted up into a thick forest, thicker than this forest where we live—so thick that not even Baba Yaga could force her way through. And Baba Yaga, gnashing her teeth and screaming with rage and disappointment, turned round and drove away home to her little hut on hen’s legs.

The little girl ran on home. She was afraid to go in and see her stepmother, so she ran into the shed.

Scratch, scratch! Out came the little mouse.

“So you got away all right, my dear,” says the little mouse. “Now run in. Don’t be afraid. Your father is back, and you must tell him all about it.”

The little girl went into the house.

“Where have you been?” says her father; “and why are you so out of breath?”

The stepmother turned yellow when she saw her, and her eyes glowed, and her teeth ground together until they broke.

But the little girl was not afraid, and she went to her father and climbed on his knee, and told him everything just as it had happened. And when the old man knew that the stepmother had sent his little daughter to be eaten by Baba Yaga, he was so angry that he drove her out of the hut, and ever afterwards lived alone with the little girl. Much better it was for both of them.

“And the little mouse?” said Ivan.

“The little mouse,” said old Peter, “came and lived in the hut, and every day it used to sit up on the table and eat crumbs, and warm its paws on the little girl’s glass of tea.”

“Tell us a story about a cat, please, grandfather,” said Vanya, who was sitting with Vladimir curled up in his arms.

“The story of a very happy cat,” said Maroosia; and then, scratching Bayan’s nose, she added, “and afterwards a story about a dog.”

“I’ll tell you the story of a very unhappy cat who became very happy,” said old Peter. “I’ll tell you the story of the Cat who became Head-forester.”

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