



Jonek

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Polish

Intermediate

11 min read

“If you would possess a pipe, at the sound of which even unwilling legs will dance, and which will make the dead rise and appear as they lived, seek for it in the forest.

“In the deep, black forest, look for a green willow, which has never heard the rush of water, nor the crowing of a cock; for at the sound of the cock’s crow spirits disappear, and a willow which has heard the rush of water will never make anybody dance.

“If you wish a girl to love you, catch a bat, put it into an earthen pot, and at midnight take the pot to an anthill and bury it there. On the following night, also at twelve o’clock, go again and fetch the pot away. You will find in it a pitchfork and a rake. If you draw the rake from the direction of the girl towards yourself, she will love you: if from that of a favourite companion, he will be your friend. If a woman love you, for whom you do not care, push towards her with the pitchfork, and she will hate you: if a man, for whom you do not care, offers you his friendship, or who is unworthy of yours, do the same towards him, and he will trouble you no more.

“Thus, by means of the pipe you will be made merry, and be able to see the dead as they lived; by the aid of the rake you will gain love and friendship.

“But should you desire to know the dark, unseen future, or to possess unbounded riches, listen to this last

instruction:—

“On the eve of St. John’s Day, exactly at midnight, the fern blooms; but it is not easy to obtain its flower. Terror will stop your breath, and turn your blood cold; your heart will almost cease to beat. Thunder-storms without number will rage around you, and shake the very ground. The hair on your head will stand erect like poplars, and not even the wind will be able to bend it down. If you can bear all this, the fern-flower, obtained with so much courage, will show you the future, and give you countless gold. By its means you will become rich, and be able to look into the future as in a mirror.”

A young peasant heard these words in the gloom of a forest, and at once left his oxen and waggon laden with chopped wood. Filled with joy and hope, he went deeper into the wood in search of a willow, from the bark of a bough of which he might make the wonderful pipe. He wandered about for a long time looking for the green willow. At last he found one in the middle of a dry meadow in the depth of the forest. He cut a straight bough, twisted off the bark, and the pipe was soon made.

He played on it, and joy filled his heart. He was alone in the solitude of the dense wood, and he himself was filled with gladness at the sound of the pipe, and danced and hopped about on the green meadow, until, tired with the exertion, he fell on the grass to rest. Having now himself experienced the power of the pipe, the peasant trembled with fear as he remembered that its voice could call up the dead. At the very thought of this, cold perspiration came on his forehead. His curiosity, however, overcame his fear, and he felt an irresistible wish to go to the cemetery at once. He hid the pipe under his coat, and began to trace his way out of the forest by a narrow and difficult pass.

The young peasant soon came to an open place, and ran up a little hill; it was surrounded by old and new graves. Here two roads met, and a new cross stood over a fresh grave. “Well,” said the peasant to himself, “let us try the pipe here; it is a long way to the cemetery. I’ll see whether even one dead man will rise up at the sound of it.”

He took out the pipe and played. As soon as its voice was heard, the cross fell to the ground, the grave opened, and an old beggar appeared, who had been killed on the cross-road thirty years before.

The young man turned his head away with horror at the sight of the old and withered face of the miserable

beggar, made more hideous by the wounds he had received. In his fright he kept on playing, and now saw that the remaining graves also suddenly opened; then he heard the clatter of arms and the trampling of horses' hoofs. There appeared to him a number of tall knights in armour, the greater part of them on horseback. If the peasant was greatly terrified at the sight of the old beggar, he was struck almost dead with fear as the stalwart knights rose before him. Although he was the tallest man of the village to which he belonged, his head would scarcely reach to the knees of these giants. Frightened more than ever, he opened his mouth and rubbed his eyes. As soon as he ceased to blow in the pipe, the spirits returned to their graves, and the earth covered them up, at the same time a cold damp wind blew which shook the grass and flowers.

Although almost worn out with fatigue and excitement, the peasant next procured the rake and the pitchfork, so anxious was he to gain love and friendship.

Sophy, a young, black-eyed girl, who lived in a neighbouring hut, had moved his heart for a long time past. The girl, however, did not care for young Jonek, as the peasant was commonly called. In vain he sang to her,—

“Sophy's eyes are as beautiful as blackberries,

Her mouth is as sweet as honey!”

Sophy laughed at Jonek and his song.

One day she was weeding flax in the garden; Jonek, hidden from her view, drew the magic rake along the ground from her towards himself. From that moment Sophy received his attentions more graciously, and the delighted Jonek kissed the rake in his joy and gratitude. He was sure she loved him, and to make his happiness complete he now only wanted a friend.

He chose a young companion whose name was Linnet. A warm friendship soon sprang up between the two. Young Linnet was well-known to black-eyed Sophy; when the two young men came to see her she always received them with a smile. Jonek began already to think of his marriage with Sophy; and one day, full of thought on the subject, sat down behind a rick of hay. All at once he heard some conversation behind the next rick. Curious to know what it was about, he approached the hay-rick unperceived, and overheard his friend Linnet talking with Sophy about their own wedding-day. Full of rage, Jonek broke the rake and the pitchfork, and renounced both friendship and love.

“What’s the use of the willow pipe, the bat’s rake and pitchfork to me?” cried Jonek with tears in his eyes. “The first tired me out, making me dance against my will, besides frightening me out of my senses with the sight of the ghosts. It was all in vain that I drew Sophy towards me with the bat’s rake. All is now lost! I had better try and get some money, and see what will happen to me next.”

The next day was St. John’s Eve. Jonek did not sleep in his hut that night; his poor mother awaited him in vain. At night a terrible storm broke down many of the trees in the neighbouring forest; houses and barns, struck by lightning, were burnt to the ground. About mid-day Jonek returned to his hut, pale and trembling. His eyes glared like the eyes of a madman. In vain his poor old mother put a dish of boiled pudding with bacon before him—he could not touch a morsel. His mother prayed; Jonek sighed heavily; at times, however, he would smile joyfully to himself, as he shook the gold in his pockets.

II.

Jonek was the chief groomsman at the wedding of Sophy with Linnet. He was dressed in richer clothes than any one else present, and he gave plenty of money to the musicians. From that day he took the lead in the public-houses; often treated the whole village, and every holiday time paid the musicians like a gentleman. Sometimes he would play on the willow pipe, and all who heard it would dance joyfully the whole night through.

But Jonek was not satisfied with being rich. He wished to know what would happen to him in the future. He took the fern-flower from his pocket, and said to it,—

“Tell me, show me, oh flower!

What will become of thy Jonek?”

And he heard a voice from underground, saying in reply,—

“Thou wilt be hanged:

Thy legs, cold and stifle, will shake in the wind.”

“Confound it!” cried Jonek angrily, “I shall not be hanged, for I have done nothing to deserve it.” And he laughed at the idea; but at night, though half tipsy, he could not sleep for fear. Jonek enjoyed himself, however,

for a long time before he began to think seriously of the future. His pockets were now empty: the attempt to obtain the fern-flower a second time by the same person was impossible; and he had no more money. This troubled him very much. The Easter holidays were approaching, and all the young men in the village asked Jonek to engage the musicians early; while Jonek had not even a penny left to pay them with. Unable to sleep, he pondered on his troubles, and he then recollected that with the help of the fern-flower he could discover hidden treasures, as he had done before when he had found gold under the ruins of an old castle. He therefore rubbed the fern-flower again, and in a vision saw a gentleman in his garden, and in that garden he also saw a brass box full of treasure, buried six feet under an apple tree. Jonek got up, ran quickly to the garden, and began to dig. He had already dug out the heavy box, and was about to push it over the wall, when the owner awoke, and hearing the thief, rushed out of the house and stopped him. But Jonek, greedy of gold, and fearing discovery, struck him with the spade on the head, and killed him on the spot.

At the cries of their dying master, the servants came running out of the house, seized the murderer, and delivered him up to justice.

Six months afterwards Jonek was hanged in the market-place of a neighbouring town. Such was the reward for his greed of gold, and his desire to know the future.

The wind blew hard, the voice of the enchanted pipe was no longer heard, yet the stiff, cold legs of Jonek swung and shook in the wind as if he were about to dance.

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