



Vitazko the Victorious: The Story of a Hero Whose Mother Loved a Dragon

Parker Fillmore

Czechoslovak

Easy

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There was once a mother who had an only son. “He shall be a hero,” she said, “and his name shall be Vitazko, the Victorious.”

She suckled him for twice seven years and then, to try his strength, she led him out to the forest and bade him pull up a fir-tree by the roots.

When the boy was not strong enough to do this, she took him home and suckled him for another seven years. Then when she had suckled him for thrice seven years, she led him out to the forest again and ordered him to pull up a beech-tree by its roots.

The youth laid hold on the tree and with one mighty pull uprooted it.

“Now, my son, you are strong enough,” the mother said. “Now you are worthy of your name Vitazko. Forget not the mother who has suckled you for thrice seven years but, now that you are grown, take care of her.”

“I will, my mother,” Vitazko promised. “Only tell me what you want me to do.”

“First,” the mother said, “go out into the world and find me a splendid dwelling where I may live in peace and plenty.”

Taking in his hand the uprooted beech-tree as a club and armed only with it, Vitazko set forth. He followed the wind here and there and the other place and it led him at last to a fine castle.

This castle was inhabited by dragons. Vitazko pounded on the castle gates but the dragons refused to admit him. Thereupon the young hero battered down the gates, pursued the dragons from room to room of the castle, and slaughtered them all.

When he had thrown the last of them over the wall, he took possession of the castle. He found nine spacious chambers and a tenth one the door of which was closed.

Vitazko opened the door and in the room he found a dragon. This dragon was a prisoner. Three iron hoops were fastened about his body and these were chained to the wall.

“Oho!” Vitazko cried. “Another dragon! What are you doing here?”

“Me?” the dragon said. “I’m not doing anything but just sitting here. My brothers imprisoned me. Unchain me, Vitazko! If you do, I will reward you richly.”

“I will not!” Vitazko said. “A fine scamp you must be if your own brothers had to chain you up! No! You stay where you are!”

“With that Vitazko slammed the door in the dragon’s face and left him.

Then he went for his mother and brought her to the castle.

“Here, my mother,” he said, “is the dwelling I have won for you.”

He took her through the nine spacious chambers and showed her everything. At the tenth door he said:

“This door is not to be opened. All the castle belongs to you except this room only. See to it that this door is never opened. If it is opened, an evil fate will overtake you.”

Then Vitazko took his beechen club and went out hunting.

He was hardly gone before his mother sat down before the tenth door and said to herself over and over:

“I wonder what can be in that room that Vitazko doesn’t want me to open the door.”

At last when she could restrain her curiosity no longer, she opened the door.

“Mercy on us!” she said when she saw the dragon. “Who are you? And what are you doing here?”

“Me?” the dragon said. “I’m only a poor harmless dragon. They call me Sharkan. My brothers chained me here. They would have freed me long ago but Vitazko killed them. Unchain me, dear lady, and I will reward you richly.”

He begged her and cajoled her until she was half minded to do as he asked.

“You are very beautiful,” Sharkan said. “If only I were free I would make you my wife.”

“Ah, but what would Vitazko say to that?” the woman asked.

“Vitazko?” repeated Sharkan. “Do you fear your own son? A dutiful son he is, to give you the castle and then forbid you to enter this room! If you were to marry me, we should soon get rid of this Vitazko and then live here together in peace and merriment.”

The woman listened to these cajoling words until she was completely won over.

“But how, dear Sharkan, shall I unchain you?”

He told her to go to the cellar and from a certain cask to draw him a goblet of wine. Instantly he drank the wine, bang! the first iron hoop burst asunder. He drank a second goblet, and the second iron hoop fell from him. He drank a third goblet and, lo! he was free.

Then in dismay at what she had done, the woman cried:

“Ah me, what will Vitazko say when he comes home!”

“I have thought out a plan,” Sharkan said. “Listen: when he comes home pretend you’re sick and refuse to eat. When he begs you to eat something, tell him that nothing can tempt you but a suckling from the Earth Sow. He will at once go out and hunt the Earth Sow and when he touches one of her sucklings, the Sow will tear him to pieces.”

Sharkan remained in hiding in the tenth chamber and presently Vitazko returned from the hunt with a young buck across his shoulders. He found his mother on the bed, moaning and groaning as if in great pain.

“What is it, dear mother?” he asked. “Are you sick?”

“Aye, my son, I’m sick. Leave me and I’ll die alone!”

Vitazko in alarm rubbed her hands and begged her to eat of the venison he had brought home.

“Nay, my son,” she said, “venison tempts me not. Nothing can tempt my waning appetite but a suckling from the Earth Sow.”

“Then, my mother, you shall have a suckling from the Earth Sow!” Vitazko cried, and instantly he rushed out in quest of the Earth Sow and her litter.

With his beech-tree in his hand he ranged back and forth through the forest hunting the Earth Sow. He came at last to a tower in which an old wise woman lived. Her name was Nedyelka and because she was good as well as wise people called her St. Nedyelka.

“Where are you going, Vitazko?” she said, when she saw the young hero.

“I’m hunting for the Earth Sow,” he told her. “My mother is sick and nothing will tempt her but a suckling from the Earth Sow’s litter.”

Nedyelka looked at the young man kindly.

“That, my son, is a difficult task you have set yourself. However, I will help you provided you do exactly as I say.”

Vitazko promised and the old woman gave him a long pointed spit.

“Take this,” she said. “Now go to my stable. There you will find my horse, Tatosh. Mount him and he will carry you on the wind to where the Earth Sow lies half buried in her wallow and surrounded by her litter. Reach over and prick one of the sucklings with this spit and then sit very still without moving. The suckling will squeal and instantly the Sow will spring up and in a fury race madly around the world and back in a moment of time. Sit perfectly still and she won’t see either you or Tatosh. Then she’ll tell the litter that if one of them squeals again and disturbs her, she will tear it to pieces. With that she’ll settle back in the wallow and go to sleep. Then do you pick up the same little suckling on your spit and carry it off. This time it will be afraid to squeal. The Sow will not be disturbed and Tatosh, my horse, will bear you safely away.”

Vitazko did exactly as Nedyelka ordered. He mounted Tatosh and the magic steed carried him swiftly on the wind to where the Earth Sow lay sleeping in her wallow.

With his spit, Vitazko pricked one of the sucklings until it squealed in terror. The Earth Sow jumped up and in fury raced madly around the world and back in a moment of time. Tatosh stood where he was and Vitazko sat on his back without moving. The Earth Sow saw neither of them.

“If one of you squeals again and disturbs me,” the Earth Sow said to the litter, “I’ll wake up and tear you to pieces!”

With that she settled back in the mud and fell asleep.

Vitazko again reached over and now he picked up the same little suckling on the end of his spit. This time it made no sound. Instantly Tatosh, the magic steed, rose on the wind and flew straight home to Nedyelka.

“How did things go?” the old woman asked.

“Just as you said they would,” Vitazko told her. “See, here is the suckling.”

“Good, my son. Take it home to your mother.”

So Vitazko returned the spit and led Tatosh back to his stall. Then he threw the suckling over his beech-tree, thanked old St. Nedyelka, bade her good-day, and with a happy heart went home.

At the castle the mother was making merry with the dragon. Suddenly in the distance they saw Vitazko coming.

“Here he comes!” the mother cried. “Oh dear, what shall I do?”

“Don’t be afraid,” Sharkan advised. “We’ll send him off on another quest and this time he’ll surely not come back. Pretend you’re sick again and tell him you’re so weak that even the suckling of the Earth Sow doesn’t tempt your appetite. Tell him nothing will help you but the Water of Life and the Water of Death and if he really loves you he must get you some of both. Then he’ll go off hunting the Water of Life and the Water of Death and that will be the end of him.”

Sharkan hid himself in the tenth chamber and Vitazko, when he entered the castle, found his mother alone.

“It’s no use, my son,” she moaned. “I can’t eat the suckling. Nothing will help me now but the Water of Life and the Water of Death. Of course you don’t love me well enough to get me some of both.”

“I do! I do!” poor Vitazko cried. “There’s nothing I won’t get for you to make you well!”

He snatched up his beech-tree again and hurried back to St. Nedyelka.

“What is it now?” the old woman asked.

“Can you tell me, dear St. Nedyelka, where I can find the Water of Life and the Water of Death? My poor mother is still sick and she says that nothing else will cure her.”

“The Waters of Life and of Death are difficult to get,” Nedyelka said. “However, dear boy, I will help you. Take these two pitchers and again mount the faithful Tatosh. He will carry you to the two shores under which flow the springs of the Water of Life and the Water of Death. The right shore opens for a moment on the instant of noon and under it the Water of Life bubbles up. The left shore opens for a moment at midnight and under it lies the still pool of the Water of Death. Wait at each shore until the moment it opens. Then reach in and scoop up a pitcher of water. Be swift or the shores will close upon you and kill you.”

Vitazko took the two pitchers and mounted Tatosh. The horse rose on the wind and carried Vitazko far, far away beyond the Red Sea to the two shores of which old Nedyelka had told him.

At the moment of noon the right shore opened for an instant and Vitazko scooped up a pitcher of the Water of Life. He had scarcely time to draw back before the opening closed with a crash.

He waited at the left shore until midnight. At the moment of midnight the left shore opened for an instant. Vitazko scooped up a pitcher of water from the still pool of the Water of Death and pulled swiftly back as the opening closed.

With the two pitchers safe in his hands, Vitazko mounted Tatosh and the magic steed rising on the wind carried him home to St. Nedyelka.

“And how did things go?” the old woman asked.

“Very well,” Vitazko said. “See, here are the Waters.”

St. Nedyelka took the two pitchers and when Vitazko wasn't looking changed them for two pitchers of ordinary water which she told him to carry at once to his mother.

At the castle the mother and Sharkan were again making merry when from afar they saw Vitazko with two pitchers in his hands. The mother fell into a great fright and wept and tore her hair, but the dragon again reassured her.

“He's come back this time,” he said, “but we'll send him off again and he'll never return. Refuse the Waters and tell him you're so sick that nothing will help you now but a sight of the bird, Pelikan. Tell him if he loves you he will go after the bird, Pelikan, and once he goes we need never fear him again.”

Vitazko when he reached the castle hurried into his mother's chamber and offered her the Waters.

“Here, dear mother, is a pitcher of the Water of Life and a pitcher of the Water of Death. Now you will get well!”

But his mother pushed both pitchers away and, moaning and groaning as if she were in great pain, she said:

“Nay, you are too late with your Water of Life and your Water of Death! I am so far gone that nothing will cure me now but a sight of the bird, Pelikan. If you really loved me you would get it for me.”

Vitazko, still trusting his mother, cried out:

“Of course I love you! Of course I’ll get you the bird, Pelikan, if that is what will cure you!”

So once more he snatched up his beech-tree and hurried off to St. Nedyelka.

“What is it now?” the old woman asked him.

“It’s my poor mother,” Vitazko said. “She’s too far gone for the Water of Life and the Water of Death. Nothing will help her now but a sight of the bird, Pelikan. Tell me, kind Nedyelka, how can I get the bird, Pelikan?”

“The bird, Pelikan, my son? Ah, that is a task to capture Pelikan! However, I will help you. Pelikan is a giant bird with a long, long neck. When he shakes his wings he raises such a wind that he blows down the forest trees. Here is a gun. Take it and mount my faithful Tatosh. He will carry you far away to the vast wilderness where Pelikan lives. When you get there, note carefully from what direction the wind blows. Shoot in that direction. Then quickly push the ramrod into the barrel of the gun and leave it there and come back to me as fast as you can.”

Vitazko took the gun and mounted Tatosh. The magic steed rose on the wind and carried him far off to the distant wilderness which was the home of the bird, Pelikan. There Tatosh sank to earth and Vitazko dismounted. Immediately he felt a strong wind against his right cheek. He took aim in that direction and pulled the trigger. The hammer fell and instantly Vitazko pushed the ramrod into the gun barrel. He threw the gun over his shoulder and mounted Tatosh. Tatosh rose on the wind and in a twinkling had carried him back to St. Nedyelka.

“Well, son, how did things go?” the old woman asked as usual.

“I don’t know,” Vitazko said. “I did as you told me. Here is the gun.”

“Let me see,” Nedyelka said, squinting into the gun barrel. “Ah, son, things went very well indeed! Here is Pelikan inside the barrel.”

She drew something out of the gun barrel and sure enough it was the bird, Pelikan.

She gave Vitazko another gun and told him to go out and shoot an eagle. Then she told him to carry Pelikan home to his mother, but instead of giving him Pelikan she gave him the eagle.

When Sharkan and his mother saw Vitazko coming, they decided that this time they would send him after the

Golden Apples. These grew in the garden of the most powerful dragon in the world.

“If Vitazko goes near him,” Sharkan said, “the dragon will tear him to pieces for he knows that it was Vitazko who killed all his brother dragons.”

So the mother again feigned sickness and, when Vitazko rushed in to her and offered her what he supposed was Pelikan, she moaned and groaned and pushed the bird aside.

“Too late! Too late! I’m dying!”

“Don’t say that!” poor Vitazko begged. “Will nothing save you?”

“Yes, the Golden Apples that grow in the garden of Mightiest Dragon could still save me. If you really loved me you’d get them for me.”

“I do love you, mother,” Vitazko cried, “and I’ll get you the Golden Apples wherever they are!”

So without a moment’s rest he hurried back to St. Nedyelka.

“Well, son, what is it now?” the old woman asked.

Vitazko wept.

“It’s my poor mother. She’s still sick. Pelikan hasn’t cured her. She says now that only the Golden Apples from the garden of Mightiest Dragon can cure her. Dear, kind Nedyelka, tell me, what shall I do?”

“The Golden Apples from the garden of Mightiest Dragon! Ah, my son, that will be a task for you! For this you will need every ounce of your strength and more! But never fear! I will again befriend you. Here is a ring. Put it on a finger of your right hand and when you are sore pressed twist the ring around your finger and think of me. Instantly you will have the strength of a hundred fighting men. Now take this sword, mount the faithful Tatosh, and good luck go with you.”

Vitazko thanked the dear old woman, mounted Tatosh, and was soon carried far away to the garden of the dragon. A high wall surrounded the garden, so high that Vitazko could never have scaled it alone. But it is as easy for a horse like Tatosh to take a high wall as it is for a bird.

Inside the garden Vitazko dismounted and began to look for the tree that bore the Golden Apples. Presently he

met a beautiful young girl who asked him what he was doing in the dragon's garden.

"I'm looking for the Golden Apples," he told her. "I want some of them for my sick mother. Do you know where they are?"

"I do indeed know where they are," the girl said, "for it is my duty to guard them. If I were to give you one the wicked dragon would tear me to pieces. I am a royal princess but I am in the dragon's power and must do as he says. Dear youth, take my advice and escape while you can. If the dragon sees you he will kill you as he would a fly."

But Vitazko was not to be dissuaded from his quest.

"Nay, sweet princess, I must get the apples."

"Well, then," she said, "I will help you all I can. Here is a precious ring. Put it on a finger of your left hand. When you are sore pressed, think of me and twist the ring and you will have the strength of a hundred men. To conquer this horrible monster you will need the strength of more than a hundred."

Vitazko put on the ring, thanked the princess, and marched boldly on. In the center of the garden he found the tree that bore the Golden Apples. Under it lay the dragon himself.

On sight of Vitazko he raised his head and bellowed out:

"Ho, you murderer of dragons, what do you want here?"

Nothing daunted, Vitazko replied:

"I am come to shake down some of the Golden Apples."

"Indeed!" the dragon roared. "Then you will have to shake them down over my dead body!"

"I shall be glad to do that!" Vitazko said, springing at the dragon and at the same time twisting around the ring on his right hand and thinking of kind old St. Nedyelka.

The dragon grappled with him and for a moment almost took him off his feet. Then Vitazko plunged the dragon into the earth up to his ankles.

Just then there was the rustling of wings overhead and a black raven cawed out:

“Which of you wants my help, you, oh Mightiest Dragon, or you, Vitazko, the Victorious?”

“Help me!” the dragon roared.

“Then what will you give me?”

“As much gold as you want.”

“Nay, raven,” Vitazko shouted, “help me and I will give you all the dragon’s horses that are grazing over yonder in the meadow.”

“Very well, Vitazko,” the raven croaked. “I’ll help you. What shall I do?”

“Cool me when I’m hot,” Vitazko said, “when the dragon breathes on me his fiery breath.”

They grappled again and the dragon plunged Vitazko into the ground up to his ankles. Twisting the ring on his right hand and thinking of St. Nedyelka, Vitazko gripped the dragon around the waist and plunged him into the earth up to his knees.

Then they paused for breath and the raven which had dipped its wings in a fountain sat on Vitazko’s head and shook down drops of cool water on his heated face.

Then Vitazko twisted the ring on his left hand, thought of the beautiful princess, and closed with the dragon again. This time with a mighty effort he gripped the dragon as if he were a stake of wood and drove him into the ground up to his very shoulders. Then quickly drawing Nedyelka’s sword, he cut off the dragon’s head.

At once the lovely princess came running and herself plucked two of the Golden Apples and gave them to Vitazko. She thanked him prettily for rescuing her and she said to him:

“You have saved me, Vitazko, from this fierce monster and now I am yours if you want me.”

“I do want you, dear princess,” Vitazko said, “and, if I could, I’d go with you at once to your father to ask you in marriage. But I cannot. I must hurry home to my sick mother. If you love me, wait for me a year and a day and I’ll surely return.”

The princess made him this promise and they parted.

Remembering the raven, Vitazko rode over to the meadow and slaughtered the dragon's horses. Then rising on Tatosh he flew home on the wind to St. Nedyelka.

"Well, son, how did things go?" the old woman asked.

"Gloriously!" Vitazko answered, showing her the Golden Apples. "But if the princess hadn't given me a second ring I might have been vanquished."

"Take home the Golden Apples to your mother," Nedyelka said, "and this time ride Tatosh to the castle."

So Vitazko mounted Tatosh again and flew to the castle.

Sharkan and his mother were making merry together when they saw him coming.

"Here he comes again!" the mother cried. "What shall I do? What shall I do?"

But Sharkan could think of nothing further to suggest. So without a word he hurried to the tenth chamber where he hid himself and the woman had to meet Vitazko as best she could.

She laid herself on the bed feigning still to be sick and when Vitazko appeared she greeted him most affectionately.

"My dear son, back again? And safe and sound? Thank God!"

Then when he gave her the Golden Apples she jumped up from the bed, pretending that the mere sight of them had cured her.

"Ah, my dear son!" she cried, petting him and caressing him as she used to when he was a child. "What a hero you are!"

She prepared food and feasted him royally and Vitazko ate and was very happy that his mother was herself again.

When he could eat no more she took a strong woolen cord and, as if in play, she said to him:

"Lie down, my son, and let me bind you with this cord as once I bound your father. Let me see if you are as

strong as he was and able to break the cord.”

Vitazko smiled and lay down and allowed his mother to bind him with the woolen cord. Then he stretched his muscles and burst the cord asunder.

“Ah, you are strong!” his mother said. “But come, let me try again with a thin silken cord.”

Suspecting nothing, Vitazko allowed his mother to bind him hand and foot with a thin silken cord. Then when he stretched his muscles, the cord cut into his flesh. So he lay there, helpless as an infant.

“Sharkan! Sharkan!” the mother called.

The dragon rushed in with a sword, cut off Vitazko’s head, and hacked his body into small pieces. He picked out Vitazko’s heart and hung it by a string from a beam in the ceiling.

Then the woman gathered together the pieces of her son’s body, tied them in a bundle, and fastened the bundle on Tatosh who was still waiting below in the courtyard.

“You carried him when he was alive,” she said. “Take him now that he’s dead—I don’t care where.”

Tatosh rose on the wind and flew home to St. Nedyelka.

The old wise woman who knew already what had happened was waiting for him. She took the pieces of the body from the bundle and washed them in the Water of Death. Then she arranged them piece by piece as they should be and they grew together until the wounds disappeared and there were not even any scars left. After that she sprinkled the body with the Water of Life and, lo, life returned to Vitazko and he stood up, well and healthy.

“Ah,” he said, rubbing his eyes, “I’ve been asleep, haven’t I?”

“Yes,” Nedyelka said, “and but for me you would never have wakened. How do you feel, my son?”

“All right,” Vitazko said, “except a little strange as if I had no heart.”

“You have none,” Nedyelka told him. “Your heart hangs by a string from a crossbeam in the castle.”

She told him what had befallen him, how his mother had betrayed him and how Sharkan had cut him to pieces.

Vitazko listened but he could feel neither surprise nor grief nor anger nor anything, for how could he feel since he had no heart?

“You need your heart, my son,” Nedyelka said. “You must go after it.”

She disguised him as an old village piper and give him a pair of bagpipes.

“Go to the castle,” she told him, “and play on these pipes. When they offer to reward you, ask for the heart that hangs by a string from the ceiling.”

So Vitazko took the bagpipes and went to the castle. He played under the castle windows and his mother looked out and beckoned him in.

He went inside and played and Sharkan and his mother danced to his music. They danced and danced until they could dance no longer.

Then they gave the old piper food and drink and offered him golden money.

But Vitazko said:

“Nay, what use has an old man for gold?”

“What then can I give you?” the woman asked.

Vitazko looked slowly about the chamber as an old man would.

“Give me that heart,” he said, “that hangs from the ceiling. That’s all I want.”

So they gave him the heart and Vitazko thanked them and departed.

He carried the heart to Nedyelka who washed it at once in the Water of Death and the Water of Life. Then she placed it in the bill of the bird, Pelikan, and Pelikan, reaching its long thin neck down Vitazko’s throat, put the heart in its proper place. The heart began to beat and instantly Vitazko could again feel joy and pain and grief and happiness.

“Now can you feel?” Nedyelka asked.

“Yes,” Vitazko said. “Now, thank God, I can feel again!”

“Pelikan,” Nedyelka said, “for this service you shall be freed.... As for you, my son, you must go back to the castle once more and inflict a just punishment. I shall change you into a pigeon. Fly to the castle and there, when you wish to be yourself again, think of me.”

So Vitazko took the form of a pigeon and flying to the castle alighted on the window-sill.

Inside the castle chamber he saw his mother fondling Sharkan.

“See!” she cried. “A pigeon is on the window-sill. Quick! Get your crossbow and shoot it!”

But before the dragon could move, Vitazko stood in the chamber.

He seized a sword and with one mighty blow cut off the dragon’s head.

“And you—you wicked, faithless mother!” he cried. “What am I to do to you!”

His mother fell on her knees and begged for mercy.

“Never fear,” Vitazko said. “I won’t harm you. Let God judge between us.”

He took his mother by the hand and led her down into the courtyard. Then he lifted the sword and said:

“Now, mother, I shall throw this sword in the air and may God judge between us which of us has been faithless to the other.”

The sword flashed in the air and fell, striking straight to the heart of the guilty mother and killing her.

Vitazko buried her in the courtyard and then returned to St. Nedyelka. He thanked the old woman for all she had done for him and then, picking up his beech-tree club, he started out to find his beautiful princess.

She had long since returned to her father and many princes and heroes had come seeking her in marriage. She had put them all off, saying she would wed no one for a year and a day.

Then before the year was up Vitazko appeared and she led him at once to her father and said: “This man will I marry, this and none other, for he it was that rescued me from the dragon.”

A great wedding feast was spread and all the country rejoiced that their lovely princess was getting for a

husband Vitazko, the Victorious.

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