

Basic Detail Report



THE GOLDEN FLOWER OF ST. JOHN'S EVE

In our village down in the Carpathian highland lived a dower with a little son Janik, who had been blind from birth. His poor mother was heartbroken over her child's affliction and tried everything to cure him: herbs and potions, medicines, amulets, everything. But nothing did any good.

Then one day in the month of May little Janik was sitting on the bench which always stood in front of the cottage door. He had been sitting there for hours and as he sat there suddenly a great light came from down the street. Janik could not see the light, but he felt it. It was the children, driving a poor old man and stoning her.

"Stara Jaga! Bala Dziwa!" the children were shouting, "Old Witch! Old Crone!"

The words meant, of course, "Old Witch! Old Crone!" and the children were being very cruel.

Janik's mother also heard the clamor and came out to see what it was. She drove the children away and took the poor old woman by the arm.

"Come and sit down here with my Janik," she comforted, "as she sits in the house, to get some milk and bread for the poor old woman."

While his mother was gone, Janik and the old woman talked the sunken. The poor thing's voice was tender and comforting, and soon on the little fellow's face a smile of the most wonderful radiance began to appear. After a while the sound of a woman's voice was no longer heard. Janik spoke to her, but there was no answer. And when his mother came out with a loaf and milk, only Janik was on the bench, alone. The man had vanished and was nowhere to be seen.

Where had the old woman gone? The mother was about to ask Janik when she noticed on her child's face a look of utter terror.

"What is it? And where is the old woman?" the mother asked. "And what has she done to you?"

"Wait," the boy whispered, "wait until the Eve of St. John and you will know."

Janik came, and then on the 23rd the Eve of St. John's Day. Now it was time to reveal all: now Janik could tell his mother all the old woman had told him.

"Come with me," Janik commanded as the day drew to a close. "Come with me, mother, to the forest."

Together the pair started out, stopping first at the tiny Chapel of St. Mary on the westerly hill. Here they placed a wreath of green myrtle on the altar and prayed to the Virgin until the hour of midnight was about to strike. Then, with the first stroke of the magic hour, the two rose from their knees and started on the road the old woman had told Janik he must take.

First the road led them to a narrow path that wound along a dashing mountain stream.

"Hey, there! Where are you going?" a voice called out when they had gone a little way. "No! That path. This is the one you should take."

The mother was about to turn aside, but Janik held her back.

"No!" he commanded. "Pay no attention to the voices. The old woman said to take this path, the narrow one by the stream."

On the two went, Janik leading the way along the tortuous path. Soon rocks blocked their way. Sometimes it was hard even to find the path, much less follow it, but still they managed and on they went.

After a time horrid shapes appeared and evil spirits began to scream and howl all about them. Hands stretched out from amidst the trees, to clutch at the pair and draw them from the way the old woman had told Janik he must go.

But the boy and his mother pressed on, deeper and deeper into the forest. The old woman had told Janik that only in the very heart and center of the wood, only in the forest's innermost depths, would he find what he was to seek.

And what was the great thing Janik sought?

Nothing less than the wondrous golden flower of the fern, the papoose, which blossoms this one night of the year, and by daybreak is gone.

Over marshes and boggy places the mother and son pressed forward, over tree-trunks and rocks, until at last they came to a clearing. Ferns were all about and Janik's mother fell on her knees so that she could examine every leaf and blade. In the least lively place of all might be hidden the silvery leaves and bright golden flowers of St. John's fern.

Darkness was fading now, and the mother was far giving up the search.

"No," Janik insisted. "It must be here! I have followed the old woman's directions. It is here."

And there, sure enough, it was: in a far corner of the clearing, near the gnarled root of an ancient and twisted fir tree, close by the mountain stream that had guided the boy and his mother to the place. There the gladsome light of the tiny golden fern flower shone forth.

"Janik! Come! I have found it!" the mother's voice rang out in rapture. "Here, give me your hand. Touch it, your fern flower of happiness."

The boy stretch out his hand, and at this instant there came a great rush of wind in the pine leaves, and a mighty trembling in the grove. Whispering and laughter came mingled were heard. The forest had come alive to welcome the blossoming of the fern flower.

Janik plucked the golden blossom and held it to his heart, then halted his eyes in the icy water of the stream, as the old woman had told him to do. Joy unbounded filled his heart. He looked up, and lo! there was his mother. There was his mother, whom he had never seen. For the first time in his life, Janik saw her.

In the distance a cock crowed and over in the east a streak of light indicated the dawn. Janik looked down. No flower was in his hand. The fern flower with its guiding light was gone. But in the lad's eyes was the light of vision. The good St. John had vouchsafed him a far greater gift than the briefly blooming fern flower. He had granted the boy sight.

—Joseph Stroh

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