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Ririro

IMAGINATION OVER KNOWLEDGE

Ririro

The Ogre in the Woods

This time I am going to talk about myself, to tell you something that really happened to me. If you do not believe this you must not listen. I can only tell this story to children who are quite sure that I speak the truth.

I was between six and seven years old and still learning my letters at school. One fine Sunday afternoon in September I went with six of my schoolfellows into the Aulnes wood.

It was the nut season, and we knew there were a number of nut-trees in the wood.

After gathering nuts for some time on the edge of the wood, it happened that in going from tree to tree we gradually separated from each other. Before I became aware of it, I was deep in the wood. There I discovered a sort of hedge where the nuts grew so plentifully that I could hardly believe my eyes.

The spreading branches were weighed down with nuts in bunches of four, five, or even six ripe nuts in their yellow cups, hanging so temptingly.

At first I ate a good many and had a regular feast. I had never eaten such nuts! There were no bad ones and no empty shells. When I had eaten as many as I wanted, I filled my pockets. I then filled my cap and tied some up in my handkerchief. Just as I was thinking

that I could put in a few more I noticed that it was very still and lonely in the wood.

High above my head the last rays of the sunset shone among the branches of the huge elms, oaks, and poplars. Here and there a bird chirped on its nest, and far away towards the sunset I heard the sound of wheels on the road.

I could not hear my companions, but no doubt they were within call, they could not be far off. I put my hands to my mouth and shouted: "Hallo! John! Peter! George!"

I called them all and shouted their names one after the other, shouting louder and louder in all directions. But only the echo answered me. When I shouted John, the echo mockingly replied "Ohn," and when I shouted George, it replied "Orge."

Suddenly my heart sank within me, the last rays of light disappeared above my head and with startling rapidity darkness fell among the trees and bushes. The darkness seemed to grow out of the ground. The birds were silent. A cold breeze shook the branches, and far, far away a little bell rang out the Angelus.

I recognized the bell, it was our village bell. I knew that the carriage I had heard was the post-cart which was returning from Ternath to Lennick.

It was in the direction of these two sounds that I had to find a road. I could not imagine how far I was from the edge of the wood, and it was imperative that I should reach the fields before darkness overtook me. I started off with my cap full of nuts in one hand and my handkerchief full in the other.

After going a few steps, I shouted again, "John! Peter! but this time even the echo made no reply and my voice sounded so strangely in my ears that I did not recognize it.

I ran for about an hour and a half, when all at once I felt as though I was bound with ropes and I fell. I was held fast by the long tendrils of a blackberry-bush which I had not noticed in the gathering darkness. I dropped my handkerchief and could barely distinguish it in the darkness.

I then shouted again as loudly as ever I could until I lost courage and could shout no more. I dared not, because of the terrible silence which seemed to close round me. The silence was so uncanny that I distinctly heard the blood coursing through my veins.

I was alone, alone in the vast never-ending forest, lost, strayed, and far from the road when night fell. I thought of home, of my gentle mother and my good father. I thought of the terrible anxiety they would be in when I did not return. Feeling my way I sat down on the roots of a tree and began to cry....

I then closed my eyes as tightly as ever I could in order to see nothing. I meant to sit there and see what would happen, but when I raised my eyes to say a short prayer, I saw a soft light piercing through the roof of branches above my head, which seemed to me like a smiling face trying to throw its silver rays upon me.

It was the moon; she was rising in the opposite direction to which I had seen the last rays of the sinking sun. As my eyes grew accustomed to the light I

began to distinguish things around me. At first the tree-trunks, some as thick as my body, others as thick as my head, others as thick as my legs and arms. Then I saw the shrubs and bushes, the flowers in the grass, and the ferns. And a weasel.

Now I could see I was not so frightened. I got up, emptied my cap and put it on my head, determined to try once again to find a path. I started off in the same direction as the weasel had disappeared. I had walked for about a quarter of an hour when, my heart beating violently, I stopped—something like a star shone very low, low among the foliage—no, so low that it could not be a star—it must be either a light from a lantern or a window. Certainly some one must be passing with a light or living in a little house.

However far it might be, I decided to walk towards it. Oh, dear! what a long way it was. The moon was already far behind me above the trees. It was a beautiful starlit night. Far, far away a church clock struck. I could not tell this time if it were our village clock; it struck nine and still I had not reached the light. Sometimes it grew larger, then it disappeared for some time. I was very frightened. Would it never appear again? The little star twinkled once more ... suddenly it was so near that I could see it growing. Now it was as large as an egg—then as large as an orange—and finally I saw it as large as the face of the moon high among the bushes. Now I could see how the light showed up in a disc on a dark surface. A few steps farther and I found myself outside a little house. A light shone through a round opening in the shutter.

Under the window was an old broken barrel. There was no sound to be heard in the house. Could I dare to knock? Did robbers, a witch, or, worse still, an ogre live there?



To stay out all night was equally dangerous; there might be wolves or savage dogs in the wood, and witches and ogres could soon scent me out.

I tapped on the shutter, and very soon heard footsteps approaching.

"Who knocks so late?" asked an anxious voice.

"I am a little boy from a neighbouring village, I have lost

my companions and have been wandering for three hours in the wood. Please open the door and let me come in."

I heard the sound of a heavy sigh behind the door and then the voice said more gently than before:

"Oh, my child, do not ask to come in here! Get away as fast as your legs can carry you. I would willingly give you shelter! But my husband is an ogre. He devours without pity all who fall into his hands."

However, I felt so weary, I was chilled by the cold night air, and the loneliness of the wood so terrified me that to be under cover of a roof with human beings I was willing to run all risks.

To be eaten alive by an ogre was not a very agreeable prospect! But if I continued to wander about in the woods at night, I ran the danger of coming face to face with this awful man. Perhaps under his own roof I should be in less danger of being eaten.

I begged and implored so earnestly that the woman gave in and opened the door.

"Little friend," the good soul said to me, "you have not a moment to lose. It is nearly ten o'clock, it is at that hour that my husband returns from his first round. Here is a little bread and milk. If you are hungry and thirsty, eat and drink! Take good heed of what I am going to say to you! Directly you hear a knock at the door, hide yourself in the dark corner by the cupboard behind those two large tubs. If you value your life do not move a muscle. If my husband finds you, he will eat you, skin, bones, and all. If you are as quiet as a mouse I may save you."

The words were scarcely out of her mouth when "bang, bang, bang," the door shook under the blows of a heavy fist. A rough voice, at the sound of which my blood ran cold, shook the little house.

"How much longer must I wait before you open the door?"

Before the wife had lifted the latch, I was crouching behind the two tubs. I made myself as small as possible. I was so terrified that I shrank with fear. I shrank more and more, sometimes I felt as small as a little dog, then as small as a cat, and then as small as a frog!

Do you know why I was so frightened? While the woman was going towards the door I very quickly lifted the lid of each tub. Oh, horror! what did I see inside? One tub was filled with milk, but the other was filled to the brim with human flesh! Hands, feet, heads of little boys about my own age, and all were sprinkled with a quantity of coarse salt.

A tread like that of a giant sounded on the hard earth floor of the house. From between the two tubs I saw the Ogre stop in the middle of the room. His nostrils suddenly dilated as he sniffed around him like a hound. His eyes sparkled—he smacked his lips.

“Wife,” he burst forth in thunderous tones, “wife, I smell it! There is young and tender human flesh in the house! Speak! Where is it? My mouth waters.”

He took a heavy axe from his belt and brandished it in the air in a threatening manner. His wife denied this.

“You certainly smell human flesh,” she answered, “but you smell the three little boys you put in the brine-tub last Friday. I have not seen a living soul all the blessed day.”

“What!” replied the Ogre, and he began to swear.

“Thunder and lightning, do you call me a liar? I tell you that I smell a child’s fresh and living flesh.”

I saw him brandish his axe in the air and fling it into the corner where I was hiding ... oh, horror! the tub of milk was shattered to atoms. I should certainly have been in his clutches if I had not become as small as a frog from terror, and was thus carried down the drain, which was hidden by the other tub, in the current of milk.

I found myself lying outside the house, my hair and eyes full of cream. I was half dazed with alarm, but oh, so glad to be outside! I was much colder now than when I knocked at the door. If only I could find a place to rest my weary head. Just in front of me was the empty barrel which I had seen on my arrival at the cottage. The outlet of the drain was exactly under the only window. The moonlight enabled me to see inside the barrel. To my great surprise I found it half full of hay. I soon made up my mind. I crawled into the barrel through the bottom, which had been staved in, drew the hay over me, and, after saying a short prayer, tried to sleep.

I slept for some time. When I awoke, my clothes were dried. Very soon I heard a strange growling sound not far from my hiding-place. It sounded like the pattering of paws and a dog growling.

"A wolf," was my first thought, after the Ogre, the wolf which ate Little Red Riding Hood! How should I escape this time?

Suddenly the animal came near and licked the barrel, which had probably contained lard, with its rough tongue.

Looking through the bung-hole, I saw by the light of the moon a large and beautiful dog jumping about.

It suddenly struck me that if I could catch the dog by the tail I would ask him very politely if he would draw me and my tub away—far, far away from this terrible house.

The dog again approached, again I heard his tongue licking the staves. I saw his body exactly opposite the

bung-hole—then I spoke to him very gently, as gently and as agreeably as I could. I asked him to do what I wished. Oh, wonderful to relate, the dog turned round and offered me his tail. I took hold of it and immediately felt myself being drawn forward as though I were in a sledge or a boat.

At first he ran slowly without making a sound, but farther on, about fifty or sixty yards from the little house, I was so enjoying this midnight drive that I grew reckless.

I thought we were travelling too slowly. "Gee up," I cried, "Gee up, little fiery steed! Show me how you can gallop. Hallo! Gee up."

I pulled his tail, and the animal not expecting this movement bolted off like the wind.

He ran so wildly that the barrel bounded against the trees until, after a violent blow, it was smashed to pieces. The dog ran off as fast as ever he could.

Dear me! How the wood had changed! There was not a star in the sky and the moon had vanished.

Everything was enveloped in a pale grey light. Birds' song filled the air. In the distance, far away outside the wood, a hundred cocks crowed one after the other.

I again thought of my dear parents. I pictured their agony during the long and terrible night, and my heart beat quickly at the thought of being with them once more.

I would soon find the road. If only I could discover in which direction lay the village.

I heard a bell ringing, "Ding, Ding, Ding, Dong." Was it seven o'clock? Unfortunately the wind whistled so loudly

in the tree-tops that the first “Ding” seemed to come from the north, while the last seemed to come from the west. What was I to do?

Then I had a happy thought. I chose one of the highest trees, a poplar, whose lower branches hung nearly to the ground. I climbed up like a cat from bough to bough and reached the top—from there I could see right over the wood. On one side I saw fields and meadows as far as the eye could see, and on the other I saw my village, my dear little village.

The poplar I had climbed was only twenty yards from the edge of the wood. It was so high that the topmost branches on which I was perched were much higher than the surrounding trees.

My village lay there at the bottom, not far from the edge of the wood. Not far from the wall of the churchyard was the white house, the white house where my parents lived. Oh, if I could only be there, how I longed to be at home.

But I was high up above all the other tree-tops, waving my cap so vigorously in the air that the few remaining nuts fell out. While I was perched there on the top of the tree, it began to sway gently from left to right, then backwards and forwards. Then it swayed so violently that it passed over the top of first two, then three, and then ten trees. The morning breeze seemed to take pleasure in it, and blew stronger and stronger—“whip, whip—whoop, whoop,” the tree-top swayed out beyond the top of the trees on the edge of the wood. Oh, dear! it was so amusing! “Whip, whip,” in a huge semicircle over the top of a hundred trees behind me,

then in a still wider semicircle in front as far as the first houses of the village. "Whip, whip," backwards farther and farther, then "whoop, whoop," in front as far as farmer Van den Eeckhoudt's farm. Then a few yards farther and I was swaying out almost over my father's house!

Should I dare, should I take the risk? Could I in leaning all my weight make the top of the tree bend so that the rebound would send me right over the house?

"Whip, whip—whoop, whoop!" Before I had made up my mind I found myself where I wished to be.

I crossed myself, let go my hold, and landed on the edge of the large chimney-pot. I fell down the chimney into the stove.

My mother was making coffee. "My boy, my boy," she cried, "what an anxiety you have been to us. Your father and I have been up all night."

At that moment my father came in; he had been hunting round his land in search of me for the tenth time.

"My lad," he said to me, when he succeeded in recognizing me, "where have you been and why are you so black?"

"Father," I answered, "I am black because I have just fallen down the chimney into the house. I have come from the Aulnes wood, where I went to gather nuts yesterday. The Ogre has not eaten me and the wolf did not scent me out. Father, my pockets are full of lovely ripe nuts."