

Baba Yaga & Vasilisa the Fair

A long time ago there lived a merchant and his wife; they had one child, a girl called Vasilisa. One day the mother placed a little doll in the child's hands, she said, "My child, I am dying. Take this doll as my blessing. Always keep it with you and never show it to anybody. If anything bad happens to you, give the doll food and ask her for guidance." Shortly afterwards the mother died.

The Merchant soon became lonely and decided to marry again. He married a widow he thought would be a good mother but both she and her two daughters were envious of Vasilisa's beauty. They gave her heavy outdoor work to do, so she would grow thin and her face turn ugly in the wind and the sun. Despite this, Vasilisa became more beautiful every day. Each day she gave her doll food and asked for advice, while the doll would help with the tasks. As the years passed, Vasilisa grew ever more beautiful as her stepmother's hatred of her intensified.

One day, while Vasilisa's father was away on business, the stepmother moved the family to the edge of a dense birch forest. This was not just any birch forest, for in this forest lived the terrifying witch, Baba-Yaga, a witch who ate people like others ate chicken. Every day, the stepmother sent Vasilisa into the forest, but the girl always returned safe and sound with the guidance of her magic doll. One night, the stepmother crept around the house and extinguished all the candles. As the last candle failed, she said in a loud voice, "It's impossible to finish our work in the darkness. Somebody must go to Baba-Yaga and ask for a light."

"I'm not going," said the first stepdaughter, who was stitching lace. "I can see my needle."

"And I'm not going," said the second stepdaughter, who was knitting stockings, "I can see my needle."

So Vasilisa was thrown out into the dark forbidding forest. Despite her fear, she fed her magic doll and asked for its advice.

"Don't be afraid, Vasilisa," said the doll. "Go to Baba-Yaga and ask her to give you a light."

All that night, Vasilisa walked nervously through the forest holding the doll who guided her path. Then suddenly, she saw a horseman rushing by. She walked all day, until at last she came to Baba-Yaga's hut, which stood forbidding on its large chicken legs. A fence made of human bones surrounded the hut. It was crowned with human skulls. The gate had a sharp set of teeth that served as a lock. Vasilisa was terribly afraid. As the sky darkened the eyes of the skulls began to glow. Their light illuminated the forest. Vasilisa trembled, she wanted to run but her legs would not move. Almost immediately she heard a hideous noise. The earth shook, the trees groaned and there was Baba-Yaga, riding in her mortar. She stopped and sniffed the air.

"I smell a human!" she cried. "Who is here?"

Vasilisa stepped forward, trembling with fear. She said, "I am Vasilisa. My stepmother sent me to you to ask for a light."

"I know of her." Baba-Yaga replied. "Stay with me for a while. If you work well, I will give you light. If you do not, I will cook you and eat you."

Baba-Yaga commanded the gates to open and rode in. Vasilisa followed and the gates closed fast behind her. As they entered the hut, Baba-Yaga ordered Vasilisa to bring her what was on the stove. There was enough food to feed ten men; then from the cupboard she collected kvas, mead, beer and wine. Baba-Yaga ate and drank everything. She left Vasilisa nothing but a crust of bread.

"I'm tired," Baba-Yaga said. "Tomorrow, Vasilisa, you must clean the yard, sweep the hut, cook the supper and wash the linen."

"Then," she added, "You must go to the corn bin and separate seed by seed the mildewed corn from the good corn, and mind that you remove all the black bits. If you don't complete these tasks I will eat you."

Soon Baba-Yaga started snoring, her long nose rattled against the roof of the hut. Vasilisa took her doll out of her pocket, gave it a crust of bread and said, "Please help me. Baba-Yaga has given me an impossible task to do and if I fail she will eat me."



The doll replied, "Don't be afraid, Vasilisa, eat your supper and go to bed. Mornings are wiser than evenings."

Although Vasilisa woke early the next morning, Baba-Yaga was already up. Vasilisa went to the corn bin and found the doll picking out the last black bits. The other tasks were also fulfilled. The doll said, "All you have to do now is prepare the supper and after that you can rest."

Vasilisa thanked the doll and went to prepare supper. She cooked the food, laid the table and waited. As the skulls' eyes began to shine, the trees groaned, the earth trembled, and there was Baba-Yaga.

"Have you done what I told you?" she asked Vasilisa.

"See for yourself," replied the girl.

Baba-Yaga was very upset, for she wanted to eat the girl but the tasks were all completed. Hiding her anger, she said, "Very good," and then cried loudly, "My faithful servants grind the wheat!"

From nowhere three pairs of hands appeared. They took the wheat and vanished. Baba-Yaga ate the supper and said to Vasilisa, "Tomorrow you must do the same tasks and then you must go to the store room and sort out the dirt from the poppy seeds."

The next morning Baba-Yaga again rode off in her mortar. Vasilisa, with the help of her doll, finished the tasks. In the evening the old woman came back and checked everything over. Three pairs of hands appeared. They took the bin of poppy seeds and vanished. Baba-Yaga sat down to eat.

"How have you managed to carry out all the work so quickly?"

Vasilisa replied, "My mother's blessing helped me."

"I knew it," said Baba-Yaga. "You'd better be gone. I will not have people with blessings in my home."

With that, the old woman pushed Vasilisa out of the hut and through the gate. Then she took one of the skulls, stuck it on the end of a stick and gave it to the girl, saying: "Here's a light for your stepmother and her daughters. That's what you came here for, isn't it?"

Vasilisa walked all day and by the evening she reached her home. As she approached the gates she was about to throw away the skull, but suddenly she heard a muffled voice say: "You must keep me, your stepmother and her daughters have need of me."

The girl carried the skull into the house. As she entered, the skull fixed its eyes on the stepmother and her two daughters. Its eyes burnt them like fire. They tried to hide, but the piercing eyes followed them and never let them out of their sight. By morning nothing was left of the three women except three heaps of ash on the floor. Vasilisa was unharmed. She buried the skull in the garden and went to find shelter in the nearest town, where she lodged with an old woman. One day, the old woman gave Vasilisa some flax. With it Vasilisa spun the most beautiful thread, so fine it was like hair. Then she weaved the thread into the most exquisite cloth. It was brilliant white, soft and so beautiful. Vasilisa gave it to the old woman and said: "Babushka, you have been so kind to me, sell this cloth and keep the money."

The old woman looked at it and said, "My child, this is too fine to sell. I am going to take it to the Tsar."

She brought it to the Tsar as a gift. The Tsar thanked the old woman and gave her many presents before sending her home. Impressed with the beautiful cloth, the Tsar tried to find someone who could make shirts from it. However all the tailors declined the work, as the cloth was too fine for them to handle. In the end the Tsar called the old woman and said, "You must also know how to sew the cloth as you made it."

The old woman replied, "No your Majesty. It was not my work. It was done by a girl I took in."

The Tsar asked the old woman to see if Vasilisa would make the garments. Vasilisa made the shirts and the old woman took them to the Tsar. As she waited for the old woman to return, one of the Tsar's servants entered. He said loudly, "His Majesty wishes to see the needlewoman who has made his wonderful clothes."

Vasilisa went to the palace, where she and the Tsar were captivated by each other and eventually they married. When her father returned, they invited both him and the old woman to come and live at the palace. Also at the palace was the little doll, for Vasilisa carried it around in her pocket until the day she died.

