

Beautiful Tyotia

“Old Mother Witch, fell in the ditch!” I heard the children shriek at her in their shrill, strident voices. “Old Mother Witch!”

I turned around to make sure. Yes, it was she, it was Tyotia, the same Tyotia, yet somehow different—older, ugly, tattered and torn; but I recognized her for all that.

Who and what was she! Let me hasten to explain from the outset that amongst the Slav peoples, and more particularly amongst the Ukrainians, a neighbor is a relative, if not always in fact, then to all intents and purposes. A woman, if she is on good terms with you is “Tyotia” or “Auntie” to your children. A man is “Woyko” or “Uncle.” Thus Tyotia was auntie to us, as far back as I can remember.

Tyotia lived with her husband Woyko across the street from us in a queer little, drear little house whose color you could not guess at—it might have been green or it might have been blue. But if the house itself was drab, the yard surrounding it was not, for it was full of flowers and shrubs and plants the like of which you had never seen in your life before.

Let me describe Tyotia to you as I first recall yep years ago when I was a very small child. The most striking thing about her was her regal figure, her beautiful coloring and patrician features.

Tyotia was not tall. She was only medium in height, but she held herself as though she had been in the company of fine people all her life. Her hair which was long and glossy was coiled around and pyramided on her elegant little head in jet black silky braids. Her eyes matched her hair in color but they were full of fire and seemed to contain bright sparks. Her complexion reminded you of things like roses and apples, and fresh air and sunshine. Her nose was thin and long but rather classic in contour. Oh, Tyotia was an elegant woman, especially when she was all dressed up. And as she often did dress up she nearly always awed and impressed us, for Tyotia knew how to wear her clothes. She would sometimes appear in a gown as black as her hair and eyes with jewels on her bosom and fingers, and long ear-drops in her tiny ears. Over her hair she would place a black hat with an irresistible veil which she would tie up behind. A beautiful yellow shawl or scarf was usually fastened round her throat, and a coat of rich black fur covered her dainty figure. Oh, Tyotia knew how to dress.

But one of the most interesting things about her was her voice. How should I describe it? It could be soft and sweet, low and cajoling, loud and fierce, shrill and bitter. It could sing. It could cry. It all depended on Tyotia’s moods.

Now I must tell you about Woyko, who was her husband, because he had something to do with these moods.

Woyko was a thin, lanky man with a stooped figure, though he was not at all an old man at the time. The thing you noticed first about him was his smile, and his moustache, for they seemed to belong to each other. His brown moustache was extremely long, with tapering ends which drooped, but did not hide his smiling mouth. As for the rest of his face, it was nothing out of the ordinary. The top of his head was bald and resembled a small pink marble rink, hedged about with thin brown hair. As for his eyes, I can't seem to remember their color, but I do recall that they, like his mouth, always smiled. Woyko did have something remarkable about him though—his hands. They were always holding something, and were such clever, patient hands that could do almost anything—for Woyko besides being a mechanic by trade, was an inventor, a genius as I now realize. But poor Woyko died a short, sudden death on the cold prairies away from his wife with the dread pneumonia. Poor Woyko! I remember my mother telling me afterwards that Woyko had invented some kind of strange flying machine, but someone had stolen the plans for it just before his death.

Woyko, by the way, was not Tyotia's only husband. She had had one before she came to this country, but he had died over in Europe. Nor was Woyko her last. She acquired another, her third, after his death. But I see I am getting ahead of myself.

I liked visiting Tyotia when I was a child because her little house was so interesting. I can recall how (when I was about five years) or so tapping timidly at her little blue door and I heard her voice answer, "Come in little apple, come in." I would step in—a peculiar aroma would strike my nostrils. It was a jumble of green, growing plants, dried apples, and fusty musty smell. The latter smell was easily explained, for Tyotia belonged to the old fashioned school which held that fresh air was poisonous. The apples also can be easily explained. Tyotia had an apple tree, a rare thing with us on the prairies, and it grew apples which she dried for winter use. The smell of plants needs more explaining. Tyotia had no children, no pet dogs, cats, or canaries so she grew plants. It was easy for her to do so because she had what one calls green fingers. Whatever she touched grew. Her plants filled her whole house. They sat on all her window sills, on her tables and benches, and even reposed on the floor. Wherever you looked, there were plants—north, south, east and west. Tyotia was indeed a plant wizard, a sort of female Luther Burbank.

How well I remember her telling my mother one day about a prize cactus plant which she had brought up "by hand" as it were. One day she showed me the plant in full bloom. I shall never forget it with its long, slender, glossy leaves, surrounding a glorious sea of long coral-colored blossoms. Toyotia's plants were something to dream about.

But there were other interesting things to see in her house—the pictures for instances—they repelled and attracted me at the same time. And what manner of pictures were they? Pictures of devils and angels and saints mostly. One I can remember as vividly as though I had seen it but yesterday. It was a picture of a devil, a most monstrous sort of devil, with horns and a long tail and leering eyes and gnashing teeth. But the thing that fascinated me was the creature's complexion: a ghastly, livid, greeny-bluish sort of color. I would take a peep at his face and then turn away, but no, something invariably drew me back—it was the complexion and his eyes which seemed to say, "Ho, ho there, little girl,

look out; I'm all ready for you." I would do my best to become interested in the other pictures—these were mostly of boy angels dressed in long white robes with golden girdles around their waists and huge white wings growing from out their shoulders. They always seemed to be ready to fly right out of the picture frames but never did for I often visited Tyotia and the angels were always there. Then too, there were pictures of pale saints with haloes around their heads. I always felt sorry for them for their eyes looked so piteously heavenward.

There were other objects of interest in Tyotia's house—one was her dresser, on which stood many little jewel boxes and containers filled with trinkets with which Tyotia loved to adorn herself—rings of gold, a bracelet made of odd-looking links, great blobs of earrings, pendants with amethysts and amber stones, necklaces of coral. But the most fascinating thing to me, was a small bridge of teeth. How surprised I was one day to see Tyotia take it and fit it into her mouth!

And in one corner of the room stood a sewing machine; in another, bolts of cloth of various hues and shades. When Tyotia wanted she could run up on the machine clothes fit for a queen, but she rarely was thus inclined so the machine stood idle, and the bolts grew faded and gathered dust.

One day I noticed in the corner something I had not seen before. It was a mirror with a white frame. At the top right on the glass itself were printed very artistically these words "GOOD MORNING!" That was the day I discovered Tyotia was an artist and could paint. But better than all that, she could sing. The whole neighborhood knew this fact. They knew she could cry too, and shriek. Early in the morning Tyotia's voice would go flying to the skies, her thin, high voice could be heard for a block around singing a love song. Then we knew Tyotia was happy. Other times we would hear that same voice shriek and wail for all its worth. Then we would know she was unhappy. And sure enough she would invariably come running to our house to tell my mother all her troubles. My young and pretty mother would listen but never offer a word of either blame or otherwise for she knew Tyotia was a very temperamental person and Woyko was so good to her.

Well time passed on, and soon there was no Woyko. And oh, how we missed him for it was he who used to bounce us high up in the air and sing to us in the traditional manner of fond parents and relatives. We missed the gay balloons he used to give us, the visits to his little workshop in which iron and other metal filings fell to the floor in curls. There was no one to fasten then now to our own ringlets in play. Everything was dusty and forlorn after Woyko died.

And how Tyotia lamented and cried for him, called him her dear Basil, the best husband in the world. No longer did she remember the unkind things she had said about him.

Well a few years passed by and one day Tyotia came to tell us she was planning to marry again. We were invited to the wedding festivities, but I remember I was the only representative of the family to go.

The bridegroom was a man a number of years her junior, a quiet, rather decent appearing chap. We all wondered how the marriage would work. It did not take long to find out. It was the same thing all over again. Tyotia would come scurrying and hurrying to tell Mother her tale of woe: the man was cruel to her, he was mean, she could not live with him, he was a miser. To make a long story short, after several attempts her husband managed to run away from her. She was left alone at last.

From then on her life was one of dissension and quarrels with her neighbors. No time passed the children forget her pet name of Tyotia and began call her “Witch.” Boys insisted on robbing her now large tree of its numerous apples; girls picked flowers from between the fence pickets. No one liked her any more.

We did not see her for years. Then one day she arrived at our new home—she was getting old, her looks were gone, and her figure too. Her clothes were ragged, her teeth missing.

Why did she come? It was election day and she was still as she used to be interested in politics. She sat and sat, and talked and talked. My poor mother, out of sheer politeness, stayed with her. The next day I found out what she had talked about: her neighbors, how wicked they were, how bad their children were to call her Witch.

Poor woman! In desperation she had decided to call on us, the only ones who still called her Tyotia, to unburden herself.

Some day, when election time comes you may see a queer bent figure with a wrinkled face in which are two black eyes, and a mouth which babbles soundlessly to itself. The children may call her Witch, but we, now grown up, can see in her the woman who used to give us pennies and cakes and handfuls of fragrant flowers to take home: beautiful Tyotia.