

THE GOLDEN HILL

by Božena Němcová

Libor was the only son of a poor old widow. After he had been trained to become a gardener, he returned home. Yet as he could not continue to live there, he went to the royal gardener, asked him for work and was immediately given a post. He was an orderly, respectable fellow and a diligent worker who was liked by everyone. For three years he helped in the royal garden, and because he was careful with his money he had soon saved a few guilders. One day at noon he put down his tools and went to the little pond in order to rest beneath the willow bushes. It was his favourite place. He lay on the soft grass, thinking of what he would buy with his savings, and looked up at the weeping willows whose bent tops were reflected in the bluish water of the pond. Something rustled nearby, and after a while a gentle splashing of the water reached his ear. Libor gently parted the thick greenery to see what was happening. He saw three maidens bathing in the pond. Two of them were lovely, but the third was beautiful beyond compare. As soon as Libor saw her his head began to spin and his heart beat so fast that he thought it would fly from his breast.

The maidens had no inkling that someone was watching them. They swam for a while, then they clambered onto the bank, donned white robes and, winding floating veils around their heads, they changed into swans and flew away. While the maidens were dressing, Libor's eyes had feasted on the sight. Only when they had taken the form of swans did he jump up with a deep sigh and stretch out his hands after them as if longing to stop the fleeing creatures.

When the swans had vanished from sight, Libor went to the place where the beautiful maiden had stood. He knelt down on the grass and laid his cheek on the place where he could see her tiny footprints. He would have lain long this way if the gardener had not come to fetch him. Never in his life had he worked as distractedly as he did that afternoon. He saw and heard nobody and spoke never a word.

That night Libor reflected on all that he had seen and resolved to be cleverer if the maidens should come again. He waited for the next day with inexpressible desire. As soon as it was noon he went to the pond and hid close to the place where the maidens' clothes had lain the previous day. He did not have long to

wait. Three swans flew in and, having changed into maidens, began to take off their clothes, putting down their white robes close to Libor. The most beautiful of them hung her veil just above his head. As soon as Libor heard them splashing in the water, he reached out his hand and pulled the veil from the branch. But as he did so the leaves rustled; the maidens took fright, jumped out onto the bank and threw on their clothes and veils. Soon the swans' wings were beating the air. Yet the most beautiful of them all was not among them; she was running up and down the bank searching for her veil, for without it she could not assume the form of a swan.

"Have the birds carried it off, has the wind blown it away or have I been robbed by a wicked man?" Thus the poor maiden lamented and wept. Suddenly Libor stepped out from among the bushes.

"Tell me, young man," said the maiden, approaching him, "have you not seen my white veil? It is lost and I do not know where I may find it."

"The birds have not carried it off nor has the wind blown away. I hid it in my bosom."

"Oh, I beg you then to give it back to me. I must follow my sisters."

"Not at all, young maiden. I shall not give you your veil and you may not go from here. I love you more than the whole world, more than my own mother, more than myself. If you do not stay, I shall die of grief."

With these words Libor took the maiden's hand and looked into her eyes so longingly that she listened to him with visible pleasure.

"Do not ask me to stay with you, young man. It would bring you misfortune. My mother would come for me and that would be the end of you."

"Let her come! For you I would fight with giants, jump into fire or endure any trial. Only stay with me."

"I will stay, then. What is your name?"

"Libor. And yours?"

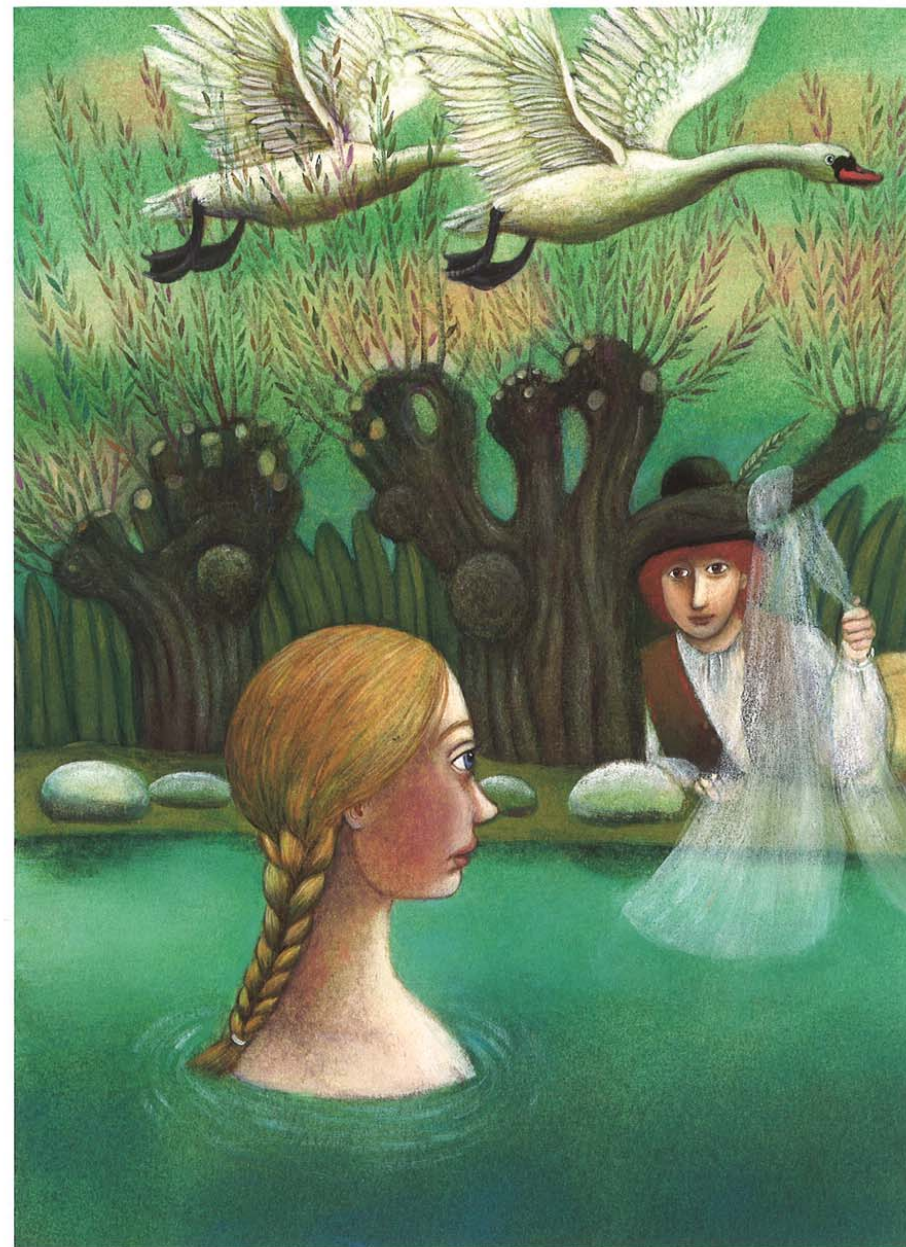
"Čekanka."

"Come, my dear Čekanka, I will take you to my mother. She will love you as if you were her own daughter. I may not be rich, but for you I shall labour day and night and whatever you desire I shall provide for you."

Hand in hand they went to Libor's mother. The old woman stared in amazement as she saw her son approaching with such a beauty and she wondered even more on hearing that she was to be his bride. She welcomed her kindly and, weeping, she blessed the young couple.

"Now, my little rose," said Libor when they had enjoyed each other's company for a while, "I must go to work again. What should I bring to you in the evening that will please you?"

"It is enough that you come yourself. Go, my Libor, and come back soon."



In the hall Libor met his mother. Taking the veil from his breast, he gave it to her, saying: "Dear Mother, hide this veil in the coffer and do not give it to Čekanka even if she asks for it. And tend her like a spring flower so that she does not shrivel."

The mother hid the veil and went to the young woman. She did not know where she came from or who she was, but she asked no questions. She was certain that her son would not choose any maiden who was not worthy of him. When she entered the chamber, she seated herself next to Čekanka and spoke to her of many things, about how she kept her house and about the good and bad qualities of her little Libor.

"I have told him many times to marry," she finished her speech, "but I cannot believe that he will soon be

doing as I urged. When I saw him coming here with you I thought that he was bringing our princess with him."

"And if Libor had not taken my veil from me, you would have seen something of even greater beauty, Mother. It is splendid to behold and it matches this dress so well. It is a pity that Libor has taken it from me. He will have to lend it to me for a while so that you can see me wearing it."

"He did not take it away. He entrusted it to my care and told me not to let you have it."

"I do not want it. Does he think, silly lad that, I would long for it?"

I know that it would not be right for me to wear it here. I only wanted to show you, Mother, how I look in it."



"Wait, girl, I will bring it and put it on you. Then I will hide it again and Libor will suspect nothing."

The old woman turned, went to the coffer and brought out the veil. Eagerly Čekanka took it from her hands, unfolded it and examined it with pleasure. Suddenly she stepped to the window, opened it and, turning to Mother, she said: "Tell Libor, Mother, that if he wants to marry me, he must come for me to the Golden Hill." Having said that she threw the veil over her head and, changing into a swan, she flew away through the window.

The poor old woman was so frightened that the blood froze in her veins. She was afraid of what Libor would say when he came home.

Evening drew on and Libor hurried home. He carried a beautiful bouquet of flowers in one hand and a basket full of delicious fruit in the other. His cheeks glowed and his eyes shone with bliss. As the old woman saw him pass the window, she began to tremble with fear. Then Libor appeared in the doorway and, casting a glance around the room, he asked:

"Where is Čekanka?"

Weeping, his mother told him what had happened and what Čekanka had said. With each word more and more of the colour faded from the young man's glowing cheeks. He clutched his hands to his breast, seized by immeasurable pain, and stared at the place where he had

sat with his beloved as though his thoughts had taken leave of him. After a long while he sighed deeply and tears like big beads poured down his cheeks.

"Mother, prepare a bundle for me, I will go to the Golden Hill," were his first words after a long silence.

"My dear son, do not do this to me. What shall I do without you? Forget the girl who has cheated you in this way."

"Do as I say, Mother. I cannot live without Čekanka. I must find her, though I must travel the whole world to do so."

In vain was his mother's lament. Libor took some money and the wrapped bundle, said farewell to his mother and went to seek the Golden Hill.

"But where shall I find it?" he thought as he walked across the fields. He took the first path that he came to and wandered long until he came to a dreadful forest in which he knew not which way to go. His feet hurt, hunger and thirst tormented him and he found no trace of any living being. All of a sudden he heard the barking of a dog. Hoping that he would find a human dwelling he followed the sound and came across a hut, which he entered cheerfully, finding it to be the home of an old gamekeeper.

"I beg you," Libor began, "grant me a short rest and a piece of your bread. I was lost in the forest and I have not eaten or drunk for a long time."

"Sit down on the bench. I shall give you what I have," the old man answered. He brought a loaf of bread and a piece of venison and gave them to Libor. A serving from the royal table would not have tasted more delicious to Libor than that dark bread and meat.

"Where are you going, my son?" the gamekeeper asked after a while.

"To the Golden Hill," answered Libor, and at once he began to tell his story to the gamekeeper. He asked the old man if he knew where such a hill might be.

"Dear son, I do not know, but I can ask." He opened the door, took a pipe and blew three times. There came a hundred crows and they circled his head with beating wings.

"Tell me, you wanderers, if any of you know of the Golden Hill."

"We do not know, but our friends who are with your brother, they will surely know."

"Go, son, to my brother. He lives a hundred miles from here in a forest. Tell him that I greet him and that he should tell you where the Golden Hill is."

Libor thanked the gamekeeper for his hospitality and good advice; he took his leave and continued on his way. It takes time to cover a hundred miles. Yet everything has its end and Libor reached the end of his long journey. The gamekeeper's brother lived in a forest. He welcomed Libor with open arms and, having received the greetings from

his brother, he at once took out a pipe and blew on it. There came two hundred crows who flapped their wings and fluttered round him.

"Which of you will tell me where the Golden Hill may be?" the gamekeeper asked them.

"None of us knows of the Golden Hill, but our sisters who live with your brother will surely know of it."

"Have you heard, son, what they say?" the gamekeeper asked Libor. "There is no other way. You must go another two hundred miles to my brother and ask him about the Golden Hill. But rest a little first and refresh yourself."

Thereupon the gamekeeper turned and brought bread, meat and wine to the guest. Libor ate well, thanked the old man heartily and went on his way. When a man's steps are winged with joy, the way is quickly travelled. And so it was with our wanderer; almost before he knew it he had covered the two hundred miles and arrived at the cottage where the third brother lived. "If he sends me away with no information, I shall not know where to turn," Libor thought to himself as he entered the cottage. The third brother welcomed him as kindly as the other two and, when he learned the traveller's quest, he summoned three hundred crows with his little pipe.

"I should like to know where the Golden Hill is. If any of you know of it, tell me quickly," said the gamekeeper to his messengers.

A single bird stepped forward and she was lame. She spoke thus to her lord: "I know of the Golden Hill. It stands in a beautiful valley three hundred miles from here and it glitters from afar. On its summit is the golden castle and in this castle lives a witch with her three daughters. She is an evil woman. Once I wanted to have a closer look at that castle but as soon as the old crone saw me she took a stone, threw it at me from a distance of twenty yards and broke my leg. Since then I have walked with a limp."

"You received your just deserts. Why do you go wherever your curiosity takes you? Yet I will send you there myself. You shall carry my guest to the foot of the Golden Hill on your wings. Wait here. The rest of you leave." The black-feathered bird was reluctant to comply, but she could not complain for her master punished disobedience most severely. After Libor had eaten what the gamekeeper put before him, they shook hands, Libor wished the gamekeeper well and set out on his journey. He led the way and the crow followed behind him. About twenty paces from the cottage the crow shouted to him to stop. She wanted to tell him something.

"Pick three acorns," she said, "and keep them carefully. When we are in the air and I cry: 'Drop an acorn,' do so."

Libor did as she advised, picked the acorns and put them in his

pocket. She then told him to climb on her back, and when he had done so she soared with him high above the dark pinewood. Forests, fields, villages and towns sped by like drifting clouds. Suddenly the land came to an end and far below them listened an endless sea of blue and green. When they had left the shore far behind, the crow cried: "Drop an acorn!" Libor took one from his pocket and dropped it into the sea. In an instant a large spreading oak tree grew from the water and the crow set herself down with Libor among its shady boughs.

"Here we shall rest. My wings are tired and we still have far to go before we reach the other side of the sea," said the crow, seating herself beside Libor. But she got up again after a while and they went jauntily on their way. As they soared upwards, the oak disappeared. Before they reached the end of the ocean, Libor had dropped the other two acorns into the sea as well. Each time tall oaks would grow from them on which the tired wanderers would rest. Beyond the ocean there was a high mountain and the crow set herself down on its summit.

"It is another hundred miles from here to the Golden Hill," she said to Libor. "The worst part is over and you must now make your own way to your goal. I will return home because I do not wish to lose my second leg." And thus saying she was already aloft and flying homewards.

Libor watched the departure of the faithless crow, when all of a sudden he heard a great tumult below him. He climbed down the hill to see what was happening. The sight was astounding: In a meadow at the foot of the rocks were two enormous giants fighting. They noticed him immediately and paused in their struggle for a moment to shout: "How dare you enter our kingdom, you creature of the earth?"

"I came across the vast sea and was resting on this mountain, when I heard your shouting. I did not know what the noise was about nor that I should not enter, so I climbed down."

"If it is so, you are pardoned. But now go away so that we may decide our quarrel."

"Can I ask you what is the matter? On my travels in the world I have learned a great deal and I may be able to help you with a piece of good advice."

"Go your way, there is nothing you could tell us we do not already know," one of them answered back.

"Don't go," the other one ordered, "I will tell you about the quarrel and gladly listen to your advice. Look, there lies a saddle that we two brothers inherited from our father. It is a very special saddle. You have only to sit on it and say: 'I want to be in such-and-such a place!' and you are transported there immediately. No wonder we both want it, and as we were unable to come to

an agreement about it we decided that whoever should win the fight should have the saddle."

"I shall soon settle the matter for you, only let me take a look at the saddle," said Libor and he stepped closer to the fateful object. The giants looked to see what he would do but all at once he sat astride the saddle and said: "I want to be on the Golden Hill!" Instantly he was gone, and that was the end of the giants' quarrel.

In a moment Libor saw that he had arrived on the Golden Hill at the gate of the golden castle. He rolled the saddle down the hill and knocked on the castle gate. The bolt was pushed aside and an ugly old crone came out to ask Libor what he wanted.

"I am searching for my beloved, whom they call Čekanka. If she is here and if you are the mistress of this castle, lead me to her."

"Oh, not so fast, young man! I am the mistress of this castle and Čekanka is my daughter. Do not think that you can gain her so easily."

"And what shall I do in order to deserve her?"

"You must accomplish three things. If you succeed, Čekanka will be yours; if you do not, you will die."

"Whatever you command, I will do."

"Then come with me," said the ugly woman and she led Libor across

a marble court into beautiful chambers. In one of them she ordered him to wait and there she left him. In a short while the door opened and there stood Čekanka on the threshold. With one jump came Libor was at her side, embracing her.

"Oh, how I have longed for you, my darling. Why did you not stay with me, why did you cause me such sorrow? Who knows now if your mother will let me have your hand?"

"Had I stayed with you, you would have had to endure even greater trials. But do not worry, and trust in me as I have trusted you. Everything will have a happy end."

Thus Čekanka comforted her faithful lover and then she left. Night was falling; Libor was given a tasty supper and then he lay down on a soft bed and slept soundly. In the morning he had only just dressed when the old crone came to him, brought him his breakfast and said: "If you want to win Čekanka's hand, come with me quickly. I will show you the first task."

Libor did not need to be asked twice. He quickly followed the crone into the yard. She gave him a wooden saw, a wooden axe and a club and led him to a large pinewood not far from the castle.

"On this spot," she said, "I want you to gather a hundred fathoms of wood before evening. If you fail, you must die."

Libor felt more like crying than working. What could he do with the

wooden tools? He took the axe, aimed a blow at a tree trunk and found that only the handle remained in his hand. The same happened with the saw. Flinging the tools on the ground he lay down on the moss. He listened to the singing of the birds and thought about his Čekanka. He remembered that he now must die, but he trusted in his beloved's words because she had promised that she would not leave him. Noon came and Čekanka brought his lunch.

"Look, I had supposed that you would be in the middle of your work and yet you are resting."

"How can I work when both the saw and the axe are broken? There is nothing to be done, and I shall die."

"Do not speak of it. Have you forgotten what I had said? Sit and eat, I shall work myself."

Thus saying she stepped to one side, grasped the ring that glittered on her index finger and turned it three times, saying: "On this spot I want to have a hundred fathoms of wood!" in an instant the wood was full of the sound of cutting, chopping and sawing, and before Libor had finished his lunch a hundred fathoms of wood were stacked on the spot.

Libor wondered greatly at the magical power of his beloved. He feared no more. They talked for a while and Čekanka impressed on Libor that he must say nothing to her



mother; then they went home. The old crone came in the evening and trembled with rage when she saw that everything she commanded had been done. She led Libor home and herself brought him dinner in his chamber. The next morning Libor was handed two iron-bound buckets and told to follow the witch again. They came to a large pond and she said: "You must collect all the water from this pond and pour it over the summit of the hill, or I shall kill you."

Libor sat on the ground and waited for noon. Why should he labour at pouring the water over the hill when his work would be in vain? At noon Čekanka came again with his lunch. "I see you have done little work," she said.

"I waited for your help, for without it my work would have been fruitless."

Then Čekanka turned her ring, saying: "I want water from this pond to flow over that hill and stay there until sunset." That very instant the water disappeared from the pond and the hill was covered in waves from top to bottom. Libor thanked his beloved with a passionate kiss and she hurried home. In the evening the crone saw the water on the hill and gnashed her teeth because her plan had been thwarted again. Libor dined cheerfully and went to bed.

When he got up in the morning he had to follow the crone to a green meadow. In the middle of it the crone took out a pipe and blew it. Three hundred hares appeared and leapt about the meadow like grasshoppers.

"You will pasture the hares on this meadow until evening. If a single one is lost, I shall kill you." But as soon as she turned away not a trace of the hares remained in the meadow.

"Only a fool would try to catch them. Čekanka will call them for me," said Libor. And that is exactly what happened. When Čekanka came, she turned her ring and ordered the hares to return to the meadow and stay there until evening. In an instant the meadow was full of them and not a single one was missing.

The sorceress was burning with fury when she saw the hares on the meadow in the evening and Libor sitting among them as happy and as innocent as a child.

"So Čekanka is mine now?" asked Libor when they came to the castle.

"You can take her tomorrow," answered the furious witch.

When it was night and silence had fallen on the whole castle, there was a sound at Libor's window: "Coo, coo, coo!" Libor jumped out of bed, went to the window and saw a sweet little dove. "Now then, what do you want here?"

"What should I want but you? I am your Čekanka," the little dove answered and she hopped onto his shoulder and started pecking him on the cheek. "I bring you some advice which you will need to follow tomorrow. Mother will take you to a hall and show you three hundred maidens who all look exactly alike and will be dressed in the same clothes. You will have to find me among these three hundred maidens. If you would choose me, pay heed to the eyes. Pick the maiden who winks at you with her right eye, it will be me."

"Thank you, dear little dove. But I would recognise you among ten thousand maidens without the need for a wink."

"Do not believe that. You will see tomorrow."

The little dove flew away and Libor waited impatiently for the dawn. No sooner had he breakfasted than the crone came for him and led him to a large hall. It was so glittering and beautiful that his senses were overwhelmed. On the golden ceiling

shone the moon and thousands of stars made of pure diamonds. Long mirrors hung on the walls and below them stood sofas covered with red velvet and silver flowers. The floor was paved with gold and silver. Yet what was the lustre of all those stars which sparkled on the golden ceiling compared to the lustre of the eyes of the three hundred maidens who smiled gently at Libor. The maidens' silver-embroidered robes rustled as they walked about the hall; each sailed past Libor like a white swan and each looked fleetingly into his eyes. Libor breathed his gratitude to Čekanka for her good advice, for indeed he would never have known which one to choose if the last one had not winked impishly with her right eye.

"This one is mine," he said, taking Čekanka by the arm.

"Keep her, then. However, you cannot leave the castle before tomorrow morning," said the witch.

Libor was willing to agree to anything now that he had what he desired. When he came to his chamber with his beloved, he asked her if the maidens were all her sisters.

And she answered: "I have only two sisters. The others were only chimeras conjured up by my mother. They would have torn you to pieces in an instant if you had chosen one of them."

"You have saved my life so many times; O beautiful maiden!" cried Libor, kissing the snow-white fore-

head. "But your mother must be a real dragon."

"Of course she is. I am still afraid that harm will come to you and therefore I shall not leave your side."

For the rest of the day she did not move from him. In the evening she went to her chamber, saying first: "If I hear of any treachery I shall come for you and we shall flee."

Filled with love and fear, Libor could not sleep. At midnight there was a light tap on the window. Libor jumped up and opened the casement. The white swan flew into the chamber and, changing into Čekanka, she said: "Quickly, Libor, put your arm around me, lay your head next to mine; we will cover ourselves with the veil so that we can both fly away. Mother wants to kill you tomorrow."

Libor did not wait to be told twice but took hold of Čekanka's body and laid his head next to hers. She threw the veil over both their heads and in an instant two swans were flying through the window and down the Golden Hill. At the foot of the hill lay two pairs of boots and a little casket. There the swans changed back into people and Čekanka told her beloved: "You will put on one pair of boots and I shall wear the other. They are twelve-league boots that I took from Mother. I have jewels in this casket, look after them well."

Having pulled on the boots they started to walk, hand in hand. With



each step they took they covered twelve leagues. But the old crone had heard a noise from Čekanka's chamber; getting up, she went to the room and found it empty. Alarmed, she ran to Libor's room; it too was deserted. Quite beside herself with rage she ran to fetch the twelve-league boots, but found them gone, too. In a fury she snatched up the twenty-four-league boots and made after the fugitives.

"Look back, Libor, and make sure that no one is following us," said Čekanka as the sun rose.

"I see something black in the distance."

"It is my mother. Put the casket on the ground, step on it and get close to me." Thereupon Čekanka turned her ring and cried: "Let my beloved be a bush and me a rose upon it."

Very shortly thereafter the evil witch hurried along the same path like a wild lion but she did not notice the rose bush with a single bud beginning to bloom.

As soon as she had disappeared, the lovers took their previous form again and sped on. But the old crone realised that she had gone the wrong way. She turned and was soon following the lovers' footsteps once more.

"Look back, Libor, and see who is after us," cried Čekanka in the forest.

"I cannot see anything but I hear a noise in the distance."

"It is my mother. Step on the casket!" Again she turned her ring three

times and said: "Let my beloved be a chapel and me a pulpit in it!"

Again the evil sorceress hurried by without sparing a glance for the chapel or the pulpit. The lovers rejoiced and hurried on. But the dragon sensed again that she had not gone the right way and she turned round.

"Look back, Libor, and see who is following us," cried Čekanka as they crossed a large meadow.

"I see something black."

"It is my mother, step on the casket." Again she turned her ring three times and said: "Let my beloved be a pond and me a swan on it."

This was no sooner said than done, but the crone saw it from a distance. When she came to the pool, she changed into an ox and started to drink water from the pond. The poor swan was left almost high and dry and feared that at any moment the old witch would devour her. But all of a sudden the ox was so full that she burst and the water flowed back into the pond.

The little swan beat her wings merrily and the pond and the swan became Libor and Čekanka again.

They did not want to look at the ugly corpse of the inhuman mother and so they went a little further, and as there was nothing left for them to fear they rested an hour. Then they hurried cheerfully homewards.

Libor's mother was weak and worn from worry. Day and night she had thought of her son, wondering

where he might be and whether she should see him again before she died. One day, just as had happened all those years ago when Libor brought home his bride, a beautiful maiden went past the window, the door opened and Libor and Čekanka came in. The old mother would have fainted if her son had not caught her.

“Come, Mother, give the shack to anyone you like, we have somewhere else for you to live,” said Libor when she had recovered a little and was able to talk to them.

When she learned that her son had a principedom, she gave away the shack to a poor woman and followed her beloved son. Behind the shack was a carriage with four horses. All three got in and they sped to the castle that Libor and Čekanka had bought on their way home. Libor lived happily with his wife and their love lasted until death. Sharing in her son’s joy, his mother was soon well again and delighted in dandling her grandchildren on her knees.

