

## The Witch and the Ditch

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The summer of 1898 was a hot one and today seemed like the hottest day yet. I was out sweating over weeds in the garden when I heard my name called.

"Hey Will!" My cousin Ernest leaned over the fence. "Wanna go race sticks?"

"Sure," I answered. "Just a few more weeds." I picked up speed, thinking of cool, running water.

Our favorite thing to do on a hot day was race sticks in the irrigation ditches that ran through town. We usually ended up wetter than the sticks, and that's the way we liked it.

"Done!" I exclaimed, pulling the last few weeds. I picked some smooth sticks from the kindling pile, and we headed down the street. We checked each ditch as we crossed it, looking for the fullest one. It was different every day, because people took turns using the water in the ditches to soak their lawns and gardens. Sometimes we went to the big ditch that turned the water wheel at the woolen mill across town. It was wide and it was fast, just like a racecourse, but my ma didn't like me going to that one. She thought I'd fall in and end up out in the fields, watering somebody's alfalfa.

We were one street away from the big ditch when Ernest called out, "Here's a good one!" We turned and followed the ditch, looking for a nice, long stretch without too many weeds. We were coming up on Old Widow Jones's house when Ernest stopped short.

"Did you know Old Widow Jones is a witch?" he asked, pointing at her black cat walking along the fence. I opened my mouth to tell him he was full of it, 'cause he usually was, when up popped Widow Jones from behind the fence. She held a kitchen knife in one hand, a red-green stalk of rhubarb in the other.

"A witch?" she cackled, her beady, black eyes gleaming.

Ernest's mouth opened wide, but nothing came out. That was the first time I'd seen his vocal cords stopped up.

"Well, what if I am?" she challenged, and my jaw dropped. I'd thought Ernest was telling me another one of his tall tales.

Ernest finally managed to get a noise out. "Um," he gulped.

"Not so sure anymore?" she gloated, "Well, I'll show you." She leaned over her fence and pointed at the ditch, waving the rhubarb like a magic wand.

"See that water in there?" We both nodded like stupid sheep. "Tomorrow that water will run red, and the next day green." She leaned closer and hissed, "You'll see. Then you'll learn to treat Widow Jones with respect."

We turned tail and ran.

I was up all night thinking about what we had seen and wondering if Old Widow Jones would do what she said.

The next day, Ernest knocked on my door. "Wanna go see the ditch?" he whispered. I didn't really, but I went. We hurried up the streets, until we got close. Then we scrunched down behind the fence and waddled like ducks. Ernest stuck his hand in the ditch and scooped up some water. Sure enough, it was red. Ernest shook the water off his hand, like it was poison, and rubbed his palm in the long grass. We ran like rabbits. Might have been my imagination, but I thought I heard someone laughing behind us.

I knocked on Ernest's door the next day. I'd waited all morning for him, but he never came. When he answered the door, I asked, "Aren't we going to see the water?"

He hesitated, then finally nodded his head. "O.K.," he said, "but if that water's green, I'm never going by Widow Jones's house again. If she can do that to water, imagine what she could do to us." I nodded. I could imagine some pretty ugly things, and Ernest was even better than me at imagining.

We didn't hurry this time. We walked real slow up to the ditch, hardly daring to look in. We knelt down and stared at it for a while. Finally I stuck my hand in and came up with dark green water. I let it run through my fingers, then looked up at Ernest. His white-blond hair was standing on end.

"Well," came a voice behind us. We both jumped. I stood, grabbed hold of Ernest's overalls, and pulled him up beside me.

Widow Jones inspected us from behind her fence, this time with scissors in one hand, yellow roses in the other. "Do you believe me now?" she demanded.

"Yes, Ma-am," Ernest gulped, his head bobbing.

"You'll treat me with respect from now on?" she grilled.

"Oh, yes," Ernest said, still nodding his head.

"Well then," Widow Jones smiled real wide. She leaned over the fence a little and asked in a soft voice, "Would you like to know how I did it?"

I felt Ernest go all stiff. "Oh no" he yelled. "Then you'll turn me into a toad, or something." He leaped over the ditch and sped down the road, kicking up clouds of dust.

I watched him go, wanting to follow, but something held me back. I looked down to see if my feet had been turned into rhubarb stalks. Phew! They hadn't.

I looked back up at Widow Jones. She was still smiling. It was a nice smile, but kind of sad. I think it was the sad part that kept me there. And the more I looked, I realized that her eyes weren't black and beady, but soft and gray, like my sister's kitten.

"Would you like to know?" she asked again. I nodded.

"It's dye," she said.

"Die?" I gulped.

"Dye," she repeated, "It's what makes cloth different colors. This ditch runs straight from the woolen mill and carries the dye they use each day. It's always the same—red on Tuesdays, green on Wednesdays."

I looked first at the ditch, then at Widow Jones, and a laugh came rolling up from my toes. It burst out, and Widow Jones laughed with me. Then she wiped the corners of her eyes with her apron and invited me in for a rhubarb tart.

I walked past Ernest's house on my way home. He came out and looked me over, like he expected a part of me to be missing.

"Well," he prodded, "what happened? Did she tell you?"

"Yup," I nodded. "Tomorrow the water will be blue, you'll see."

Ernest looked at me with new respect in his eyes. I smiled to myself. Ernest had been bested by his own tall tale. But even better, I'd made a new friend.