

Koshchei the Deathless

By Unknown

In a certain country there once lived a king, and he had three sons, all of them grown up. All of a sudden Koshchei the Deathless carried off their mother. Then the eldest son craved his father's blessing, that he might go and look for his mother. His father gave him his blessing, and he went off and disappeared, leaving no trace behind. The second son waited and waited, then he too obtained his father's blessing—and he also disappeared. Then the youngest son, Prince Ivan, said to his father: 'Father, give me your blessing, and let me go and look for my mother.'

But his father would not let him go, saying, 'Your brothers are no more; if you likewise go away, I shall die of grief.'

'Not so, father. But if you bless me I shall go; and if you do not bless me I shall go.'

So his father gave him his blessing.

Prince Ivan went to choose a steed, but every one that he laid his hand upon gave way under it. He could not find a steed to suit him, so he wandered with drooping brow along the road and about the town. Suddenly there appeared an old woman, who asked:

'Why hangs your brow so low, Prince Ivan?'

'Be off, old crone,' he replied. 'If I put you on one of my hands, and give it a slap with the other, there'll be a little wet left, that's all.'

The old woman ran down a by-street, came to meet him a second time, and said:

'Good day, Prince Ivan! why hangs your brow so low?'

Then he thought:

'Why does this old woman ask me? Mightn't she be of use to me?'—and he replied:

'Well, mother! because I cannot get myself a good steed.'

'Silly fellow!' she cried, 'to suffer, and not to ask the old woman's help! Come along with me.'

She took him to a hill, showed him a certain spot, and said:

'Dig up that piece of ground.'

Prince Ivan dug it up and saw an iron plate with twelve padlocks on it. He immediately broke off the padlocks, tore open a door, and followed a path leading underground. There, fastened with twelve chains, stood a heroic steed which evidently heard the approaching steps of a rider worthy to mount it, and so began to neigh and to struggle, until it broke all twelve of its chains. Then Prince Ivan put on armour fit for a hero, and bridled the horse, and saddled it with a Circassian saddle. And he gave the old woman money, and said to her:

'Forgive me, mother, and bless me!' then he mounted his steed and rode away.

Long time did he ride; at last he came to a mountain—a tremendously high mountain, and so steep that it was utterly impossible to get up it. Presently his brothers came that way. They all greeted each other, and rode on together, till they came to an iron rock' a hundred and fifty poods in weight, and on it was this inscription, 'Whosoever will fling this rock against the mountain, to him will a way be opened.' The two elder brothers were unable to lift the rock, but Prince Ivan at the first try flung it against the mountain—and immediately there appeared a ladder leading up the mountain side.

Prince Ivan dismounted, let some drops of blood run from his little finger into a glass, gave it to his brothers, and said:

‘If the blood in this glass turns black, tarry here no longer: that will mean that I am about to die.’ Then he took leave of them and went his way.

He mounted the hill. What did not he see there? All sorts of trees were there, all sorts of fruits, all sorts of birds! Long did Prince Ivan walk on; at last he came to a house, a huge house! In it lived a king’s daughter who had been carried off by Koshchei the Deathless. Prince Ivan walked round the enclosure, but could not see any doors. The king’s daughter saw there was some one there, came on to the balcony, and called out to him, ‘See, there is a chink in the enclosure; touch it with your little finger, and it will become a door.’

What she said turned out to be true. Prince Ivan went into the house, and the maiden received him kindly, gave him to eat and to drink, and then began to question him. He told her how he had come to rescue his mother from Koshchei the Deathless. Then the maiden said:

‘It will be difficult for you to get at your mother, Prince Ivan. You see, Koshchei is not mortal: he will kill you. He often, comes here to see me. There is his sword, fifty poods in weight. Can you lift it? If so, you may venture to go.’

Not only did Prince Ivan lift the sword, but he tossed it high in the air. So he went on his way again.

By-and-by he came to a second house. He knew now where to look for the door, and he entered in. There was his mother. With tears did they embrace each other.

Here also did he try his strength, heaving aloft a ball which weighed some fifteen hundred poods. The time came for Koshchei the Deathless to arrive. The mother hid away her son. Suddenly Koshchei the Deathless entered the house and cried out, ‘Phou, Phou! A Russian bone one usen’t to hear with one’s ears, or see with one’s eyes, but now a Russian bone has come to the house! Who has been with you? Wasn’t it your son?’

‘What are you talking about, God bless you! You’ve been flying through Russia, and got the Russian air up your nostrils, that’s why you fancy it’s here,’ answered Prince Ivan’s mother, and then she drew nigh to Koshchei, addressed him in terms of affliction, asked him about one thing and another, and at last said:

‘Whereabouts is your death, O Koshchei?’

‘My death,’ he replied, ‘is in such and such a place. There stands an oak, and under the oak is a casket, and in the casket is a hare, and in the hare is a duck, and in the duck is an egg, and in the egg is my death.’

Having thus spoken, Koshchei the Deathless tarried there a little longer, and then flew away.

The time came—Prince Ivan received his mother’s blessing, and went to look for Koshchei’s death. He went on his way a long time without eating or drinking; at last he felt mortally hungry, and thought, ‘If only something would come my way!’ Suddenly there appeared a young wolf; he determined to kill it. But out from a hole sprang the she-wolf and said, ‘Don’t hurt my little one. I’ll do you a good turn.’ Very good! Prince Ivan let the young wolf go. On he went and saw a crow. ‘Stop a bit,’ he thought, ‘here I shall get a mouthful.’ He loaded his gun and was going to shoot, but the crow exclaimed, ‘Don’t hurt me; I’ll do you a good turn.’

Prince Ivan thought the matter over and spared the crow. Then he went farther, and came to a sea and stood still on the shore. At that moment a young pike suddenly jumped

out of the water and fell on the strand. He caught hold of it, and thought—for he was half dead with hunger—'Now I shall have something to eat.' All of a sudden appeared a pike and said, 'Don't hurt my little one, Prince Ivan; I'll do you a good turn.' And so he spared the little pike also.

But how was he to cross the sea? He sat down on the shore and meditated. But the pike knew quite well what he was thinking about, and laid herself right across the sea. Prince Ivan walked along her back, as if he were going over a bridge, and came to the oak where Koshchei's death was. There he found the casket and opened it—out jumped the hare and ran away. How was the hare to be stopped?

Prince Ivan was terribly frightened at having let the hare escape, and gave himself up to gloomy thoughts; but a wolf; the one he had refrained from killing, rushed after the hare, caught it, and brought it to Prince Ivan. With great delight he seized the hare, cut it open—and had such a fright! Out popped the duck and flew away. He fired after it, but shot all on one side, so again he gave himself up to his thoughts. Suddenly there appeared the crow with her little crows, and set off after the duck, and caught it, and brought it to Prince Ivan. The Prince was greatly pleased and got hold of the egg. Then he went on his way. But when he came to the sea, he began washing the egg, and let it drop into the water. However was he to get it out of the water? an immeasurable depth! Again the Prince gave himself up to dejection.

Suddenly the sea became violently agitated, and the pike brought him the egg. Moreover it stretched itself across the sea. Prince Ivan walked along it to the other side, and then he set out again for his mother's. When he got there, they greeted each other lovingly, and then she hid him again as before. Presently in flew Koshchei the Deathless and said:

'Phoo, Phoo! No Russian bone can the ear hear nor the eye see, but there's a smell of Russia here!'

'What are you talking about, Koshchei? There's no one with me,' replied Prince Ivan's mother.

A second time spake Koshchei and said, 'I feel rather unwell.'

Then Prince Ivan began squeezing the egg, and thereupon Koshchei the Deathless bent double. At last Prince Ivan came out from his hiding-place, held up the egg and said. 'There is your death, O Koshchei the Deathless!'

Then Koshchei fell on his knees before him, saying, 'Don't kill me, Prince Ivan! Let's be friends! All the world will lie at our feet.'

But these words had no weight with Prince Ivan. He smashed the egg, and Koshchei the Deathless died.

Ivan and his mother took all they wanted and started homewards. On their way they came to where the King's daughter was whom Ivan had seen on his way, and they took her with them too. They went further, and came to the hill where Ivan's brothers were still waiting for him. Then the maiden said, 'Prince Ivan! do go back to my house. I have forgotten a marriage robe, a diamond ring, and a pair of seamless shoes.'

He consented to do so, but in the meantime he let his mother go down the ladder, as well as the Princess—whom it had been settled he was to marry when they got home. They were received by his brothers, who then set to work and cut away the ladder, so that he himself would not be able to get down. And they used such threats to his mother and the Princess, that they made them promise not to tell about Prince Ivan when they got

home. And after a time they reached their native country. Their father was delighted at seeing his wife and his two sons, but still he was grieved about the other one, Prince Ivan.

But Prince Ivan returned to the home of his betrothed, and got the wedding dress, and the ring, and the seamless shoes. Then he came back to the mountain and tossed the ring from one hand to the other. Immediately there appeared twelve strong youths, who said:

‘What are your commands?’

‘Carry me down from this hill.’

The youths immediately carried him down. Prince Ivan put the ring on his finger—they disappeared.

Then he went on to his own country, and arrived at the city in which his father and brothers lived.

There he took up his quarters in the house of an old woman, and asked her:

‘What news is there, mother, in your country?’

‘What news, lad? You see our queen was kept in prison by Koshchei the Deathless. Her three sons went to look for her, and two of them found her and came back, but the third, Prince Ivan, has disappeared, and no one knows where he is. The King is very unhappy about him. And those two Princes and their mother brought a certain Princess back with them; and the eldest son wants to marry her, but she declares he must fetch her her betrothal ring first, or get one made just as she wants it. But although they have made a public proclamation about it, no one has been found to do it yet.’

‘Well, mother, go and tell the King that you will make one. I’ll manage it for you,’ said Prince Ivan.

So the old woman immediately dressed herself; and hastened to the King, and said:

‘Please your Majesty, I will make the wedding ring.’

‘Make it, then, make it, mother! Such people as you are welcome,’ said the king. ‘But if you don’t make it, off goes your head!’

The old woman was dreadfully frightened; she ran home, and told Prince Ivan to set to work at the ring. But Ivan lay down to sleep, troubling himself very little about it. The ring was there all the time. So he only laughed at the old woman, but she was trembling all over, and crying, and scolding him.

‘As for you,’ she said, ‘you’re out of the scrape; but you’ve done for me, fool that I was!’

The old woman cried and cried until she fell asleep. Early in the morning Prince Ivan got up and awakened her, saying:

‘Get up, mother, and go out! take them the ring, and mind, don’t accept more than one ducat for it. If anyone asks who made the ring, say you made it yourself; don’t say a word about me.’

The old woman was overjoyed and carried off the ring. The bride was delighted with it.

‘Just what I wanted,’ she said. So they gave the old woman a dish full of gold, but she took only one ducat.

‘Why do you take so little?’ said the king.

‘What good would a lot do me, your Majesty? if I want some more afterwards, you’ll give it me.’

Having said this the old woman went away. Time passed, and the news spread abroad that the bride had told her lover to fetch her her wedding-dress or else to get one made, just such a one as she wanted. Well, the old woman, thanks to Prince Ivan’s aid,

succeeded in this matter too, and took her the wedding-dress. And afterwards she took her the seamless shoes also, and would only accept one ducat each time, and always said that she had made the things herself,

Well, the people heard that there would be a wedding at the palace on such-and-such a day. And the day they all anxiously awaited came at last. Then Prince Ivan said to the old woman:

‘Look here, mother! when the bride is just going to be married, let me know.’

The old woman didn’t let the time go by unheeded.

Then Ivan immediately put on his princely raiment, and went out of the house.

‘See, mother, this is what I’m really like!’ says he.

The old woman fell at his feet.

‘Pray forgive me for scolding you,’ says she.

‘God be with you,’ says he.

So he went into the church and, finding his brothers had not yet arrived, he stood up alongside of the bride and got married to her. Then he and she were escorted back to the palace, and as they went along, the proper bridegroom, his eldest brother, met them. But when he saw that his bride and Prince Ivan were being escorted home together, he turned back again ignominiously.

As to the king, he was delighted to see Prince Ivan again, and when he had learnt all about the treachery of his brothers, after the wedding feast had been solemnised, he banished the two elder princes, but he made Ivan heir to the throne.