

The Witch and the Sun's Sister

By Unknown

In a certain far-off country there once lived a king and queen. And they had an only son, Prince Ivan, who was dumb from his birth. One day, when he was twelve years old, he went into the stable to see a groom who was a great friend of his.

That groom always used to tell him tales [*skazki*], and on this occasion Prince Ivan went to him expecting to hear some stories, [*skazochki*], but that wasn't what he heard.

'Prince Ivan!' said the groom, 'your mother will soon have a daughter, and you a sister. She will be a terrible witch, and she will eat up her father, and her mother, and all their subjects. So go and ask your father for the best horse he has—as if you wanted a gallop—and then, if you want to be out of harm's way, ride away whithersoever your eyes guide you.'

Prince Ivan ran off to his father and, for the first time in his life, began speaking to him.

At that the king was so delighted that he never thought of asking what he wanted a good steed for, but immediately ordered the very best horse he had in his stud to be saddled for the prince.

Prince Ivan mounted, and rode off without caring where he went.' Long, long did he ride.

At length he came to where two old women were sewing, and he begged them to let him live with them. But they said:

'Gladly would we do so, Prince Ivan, only we have now but a short time to live. As soon as we have broken that trunkful of needles, and used up that trunkful of thread, that instant will death arrive!'

Prince Ivan burst into tears and rode on. Long, long did he ride. At length he came to where the giant Vertodub was,¹ he besought him, saying:

'Take me to live with you.'

'Gladly would I have taken you, Prince Ivan!' replied the giant, 'but now I have very little longer to live. As soon as I have pulled up all these trees by the roots, instantly will come my death!'

More bitterly still did the prince weep as he rode farther and farther on. By-and-by he came to where the giant Vertogor was, and made the same request to him, but he replied:

'Gladly would I have taken you, Prince Ivan! but I myself have very little longer to live. I am set here, you know, to level mountains. The moment I have settled matters with these you see remaining, then will my death come!'

Prince Ivan burst into a flood of bitter tears, and rode on still farther. Long, long did he ride. At last he came to the dwelling of the Sun's Sister. She received him into her house, gave him food and drink, and treated him just as if he had been her own son.

The prince now led an easy life. But it was all no use; he couldn't help being miserable. He longed so to know what was going on at home.

¹ Vertodub, the Tree-extractor (*vertyet* = to twirl, *dub* = tree or oak) is the German *Baumdreher* or *Holzkrummacher*; Vertogor the Mountain-leveller (*gora* = mountain) answers to the *Steinzerreiber* or *Felsenkripper*.

He often went to the top of a high mountain, and thence gazed at the palace in which he used to live, and he could see that it was all eaten away; nothing but the bare walls remained! Then he would sigh and weep. Once when he returned after he had been thus looking and crying, the Sun's Sister asked him:

'What makes your eyes so red to-day, Prince Ivan?'

'The wind has been blowing in them,' said he.

The same thing happened a second time. Then the Sun's Sister ordered the wind to stop blowing. Again a third time did Prince Ivan come back with a blubbered face. This time there was no help for it; he had to confess everything, and then he took to entreating the Sun's Sister to let him go, that he might satisfy himself about his old home. She would not let him go, but he went on urgently entreating.

So at last he persuaded her, and she let him go away to find out about his home. But first she provided him for the journey with a brush, a comb, and two youth-giving apples. However old anyone might be, let him eat one of these apples, he would grow young again in an instant.

Well, Prince Ivan came to where Vertogor was. There was only just one mountain left! He took his brush and cast it down on the open plain. Immediately there rose out of the earth, goodness knows whence, high, ever so high mountains, their peaks touching the sky. And the number of them was such that there were more than the eye could see! Vertogor rejoiced greatly and blithely recommenced his work.

After a time Prince Ivan came to where Vertodub was, and found that there were only three trees remaining there. So he took the comb and flung it on the open plain. Immediately from somewhere or other there came a sound of trees, and forth from the ground arose dense oak forests, each sterner more huge than the other! Vertodub was delighted, thanked the Prince, and set to work uprooting the ancient oaks.

By-and-by Prince Ivan reached the old women, and gave each of them an apple. They ate them, and straightway became young again. So they gave him a handkerchief; you only had to wave it, and behind you lay a whole lake! At last Prince Ivan arrived at home. Out came running his sister to meet him, caressed him fondly.

'Sit thee down, my brother!' she said, 'play a tune on the lute while I go and get dinner ready.'

The Prince sat down and strummed away on the lute [*gusli*].

Then there crept a mouse out of a hole, and said to him in a human voice:

'Save yourself, Prince. Run away quick! your sister has gone to sharpen her teeth.'

Prince Ivan fled from the room, jumped on his horse, and galloped away back. Meantime the mouse kept running over the strings of the lute. They twanged, and the sister never guessed that her brother was off. When she had sharpened her teeth she burst into the room. Lo and behold! not a soul was there, nothing but the mouse bolting into its hole! The witch waxed wroth, ground her teeth like anything, and set off in pursuit.

Prince Ivan heard a loud noise and looked back. There was his sister chasing him. So he waved his handkerchief, and a deep lake lay behind him. While the witch was swimming across the water, Prince Ivan got a long way ahead. But on she came faster than ever; and now she was close at hand! Vertodub guessed that the Prince was trying to escape from his sister. So he began tearing up oaks and strewing them across the road. A regular mountain did he pile up! there was no passing by for the witch! So she set to work to dear

the way. She gnawed, and gnawed, and at length contrived by hard work to bore her way through; but by this time Prince Ivan was far ahead.

On she dashed in pursuit, chased and chased. Just a little more, and it would be impossible for him to escape! But Vertogor spied the witch, laid hold of the very highest of all the mountains, pitched it down all of a heap on the road, and flung another mountain right on top of it. While the witch was climbing and clambering, Prince Ivan rode and rode, and found himself a long way ahead. At last the witch got across the mountain, and once more set off in pursuit of her brother. By-and-by she caught sight of him, and exclaimed:

‘You shan’t get away from me this time!’ And now she is close, now she is just going to catch him!

At that very moment Prince Ivan dashed up to the abode of the Sun’s Sister and cried:

‘Sun, Sun! open the window!’

The Sun’s Sister opened the window, and the Prince bounded through it, horse and all.

Then the witch began to ask that her brother might be given up to her for punishment. The Sun’s Sister would not listen to her, nor would she give him up. Then the witch said:

‘Let Prince Ivan be weighed against me, to see which is the heavier. If I am, then I will eat him; but if he is, then let him kill me

This was done. Prince Ivan was the first to get into one the scales; then the witch began to get into the other. But no sooner had she set foot in it than up shot Prince Ivan in the air, and that with such force that he flew right up into the sky, and into the chamber of the Sun’s Sister.

But as for the Witch-Snake, she remained down below on earth.