



The Fate of the Witch Wife

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A long time ago a woman named White Corn spent all of her days cooking. She would cook piles of food that she never offered to her husband, Redflower; but since the food always disappeared, Redflower began to wonder what became of it. So one evening he decided that he would watch the pile of food and see where it went. He took off his moccasins at bedtime and lay down as usual on his blankets. Then he pretended to go to sleep. White Corn waited until she thought he was asleep, then she took out her eyes, put them under her blankets, put owl's eyes in their place, and then put an ear of corn down on the blankets beside Redflower. "Corn," she said, "if Redflower should say anything to me during the night, answer him for me." After that she put all of the food she had cooked into a basket and went out.

Outside an owl met her and the two walked away across the prairie together.

Redflower jumped up off his blankets and followed them. After a long walk they went into a cave, where there were many other people all with owl's eyes; for they were all witches. The witches had taken off their blankets when they went into the cave and thrown them into a big pile by the door. Redflower slipped quietly into the cave and hid himself under the blankets.

Very soon the Chief-Witch called the council to order. "Ha," he cried, "I smell fresh blood. I smell human flesh. There is a man inside. Let us find him!", and so the witches began to look everywhere for the man. They discovered Redflower under the blankets and pulled him out.

“Why do you hide, Brother?” said the Chief-Witch, “You are welcome to our council; but first you must bring to us the heart of the person whom you love best of all in the world. That is the price you must pay for having come among us. Hurry and return with it before daybreak.”

Redflower went away very sad. He dared not disobey the witches, for it would mean torture and death to him to do so. He loved his sister better than anyone else, and he could not kill her in order to take her heart to the witches. “What must he do!” Then he remembered his big red rooster. He hated to kill his rooster; but he had to carry a freshly bleeding heart to the witches, so he went to the chicken house and killed him.

When he returned to the witches’ cave with the heart, there were other new members there with freshly bleeding hearts.

“Now that you have brought the hearts of the persons whom you love best,” said Chief-Witch, “you must be initiated into our order by passing with us under the rainbow at the other end of the cave.”

The witches all formed in line and passed under the rainbow. Each witch turned into an animal. There were coyotes, foxes, bears, hawks and owls. When Redflower passed under he became a coyote.

“Now, animals and friends, let us test the new hearts,” and Chief-Witch took a sharp stick and thrust it into each of the newly brought in hearts. The other hearts cried out like humans in agony; but Redflower’s heart squawked like a rooster.

“He has deceived us!” cried all of the witches. But they went on with their ceremonies. After a short time, however, the witches told Redflower that he might go to sleep, since he was not yet accustomed to staying awake all night; so they fixed a bed of blankets for him, and he went to sleep.

While Redflower was asleep the witches took him and laid him on a narrow shelf of rock half way down a steep cliff at Grand Canyon, and left him there. When Redflower awoke and found himself in such a perilous position, for he could not even move or he would have fallen off onto the rocks far below, he began to mournfully sing:

“Mother, Sister, she will harm me.

Mother, Sister, she will take my heart out.

It will kill me to take my heart out.

White Corn will harm me!”

The little chipmunks in their village among the cliffs heard Redflower singing. They ran out of their houses in such a hurry to see what the noise was, that they ran over Grandmother Chipmunk’s freshly moulded pottery and spoiled it all.

“Go,” said Grandmother Chipmunk to one of the chipmunk boys, “and see who that is in trouble! Perhaps we may be able to help him.”

So Chipmunk ran up the cliff to Redflower. Redflower told him what had happened, and Chipmunk hurried down into the canyon to Grandmother Spider.

“Grandmother Spider,” he said, “the witches have left Redflower on a ledge of rock to die. What shall we do?”

Grandmother Spider hurried into the house and brought out an acorn of water and an acorn cup of corn meal mush. “First of all,” she said, “take this to him and tell him to eat. Then come back to me.”

Chipmunk took the acorns to Redflower.

“Oh, Chipmunk, I am starving! This will not even be a taste for me; but I thank you just the same.”

“Grandmother Spider says eat it,” replied Chipmunk and then he ran back to the Spider village.

Redflower ate and ate and drank and drank until he had a plenty, and still the acorn cup and the acorn were full of mush and water.

When Chipmunk returned he brought with him a pine seed. He dropped it straight down to the bottom of the canyon from the shelf where Redflower was, and immediately a pine tree began to grow. "The witches will come this evening," said the Chipmunk, "and drop food down from above. They want you to try to catch it so that you will fall off and be killed. Grandmother Spider says for you to shut your eyes and pretend to be asleep when they come, and do not reach out for the food they drop."

Sure enough that evening the witches came and dropped buckskin bags of food down the cliff, but Redflower kept perfectly still until they went away.

The next day Chipmunk brought fresh food. "Beware of the witches again tonight," he said. Then he ran up and down the growing pine tree, chanting a song as he ran and the tree grew and grew.

The witches came again that night and dropped more food over the cliff; but Redflower kept his eyes closed. He heard Chief-Witch say, "It is strange that Redflower is not hungry. He does not even try to catch the food. He is not dead for I can smell his fresh blood. Let us plan some other way to get rid of him." And the witches went away.

The third day Chipmunk came again with food from Grandmother Spider. This time he brought with him some herb medicine. "The witches will come tonight as snakes," said the Chipmunk, "and will crawl down and try to push you off this ledge. Take this herb juice. When the witches come down, sprinkle it on them." Then Chipmunk ran up and down the big pine tree chanting his little song and the tree continued to grow and grow.

That night the witches came. Two of them were snakes, who crawled down the face of the cliff to Redflower to push him off onto the rocks below; but Redflower sprinkled them with the herb juice and both of them fell dead, away down into the canyon. Then the other witches were afraid and ran away.

The next morning the tree had grown up to where Redflower was lying. Chipmunk came early and ran down the tree, but the top bent under his weight. He ran down four times chanting; and each time the tree grew stronger and stronger, until after the fourth time it was strong enough to hold up Redflower.

"Come on," said Chipmunk to him, "Grandmother Spider is waiting for us."

So Chipmunk and Redflower climbed down the pine tree and went to the Spider's village in the canyon.

Old Grandmother Spider met them at her door: "Come in," she said, "I have been waiting for you and I have a feast already prepared."

For four days Redflower stayed with the spiders in their village. They gave him good food and new clothes of buckskin. On the fourth day Grandmother Spider said to him, "It is time now for you to go back to your home. Take this shiny disc with you and wear it on your breast. When your wife sees you and begs for it, roll it to her and she will receive her just punishment. Now, good-bye to you!"

So Redflower set out for his home. When he drew near some one saw him and called to White Corn: "Your lost husband is returning home again." White Corn with her two sisters, who had been helping her to grind corn, ran out of her house. They saw the wonderful shining circle on his breast.

"Oh please, give that shiny circle to me?" each one cried.

"I cannot give it to all of you," replied the man, "but if you will stand in a row facing me in the plaza, I will roll it toward you, and whoever catches it may have it."

So the three sisters stood in a row with White Corn in the center. He rolled the disc straight toward White Corn and it struck the buckskin with which one of her legs was wrapped. Immediately she turned into a snake with a shiny head and wriggled hurriedly away. And ever since that time rattle snakes have had shiny heads.

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