



# *The Sun-Horse*

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Hungarian

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*Intermediate*

*14 min read*

THERE was once upon a time a country, sad and gloomy as the grave, on which God's sun never shone. But there was a king there, and this king possessed a horse with a sun on his forehead; and this sun-horse of his the king caused to be led up and down the dark country, from one end to the other, that the people might be able to exist there; and light came from him on all sides wherever he was led, just as in the most beautiful day.

All at once the sun-horse disappeared. A darkness worse than that of night prevailed over the whole country, and nothing could disperse it. Unheard-of terror spread among the subjects; frightful misery began to afflict them, for they could neither manufacture anything nor earn anything, and such confusion arose among them that everything was turned topsy-turvy. The king, therefore, in order to liberate his realm and prevent universal destruction, made ready to seek the sun-horse with his whole army.

Through thick darkness he made his way as best he could to the frontier of his realm. Over dense mountains thousands of ages old God's light began now to break from another country, as if the sun were rising in the morning out of thick fogs. On such a mountain the king came with his army to a poor lonely cottage. He went in to inquire where he was, what it was, and how to get further. At a table sat a peasant, diligently reading in an open book. When the king bowed to him he raised his eyes, thanked him, and stood up. His whole person announced that he was not a man like another man, but a seer.

'I was just reading about you,' said he to the king, 'how that you are going to seek the sun-horse. Journey no further, for you will not obtain him; but rely on me: I will find him for you.' 'I promise you, good man, I will recompense you royally,' replied the king, 'if you bring him here to me.' 'I require no recompense; return home with your army—you're wanted there; only leave me one servant.'

The next day the seer set out with the servant. The way was far and long, for they passed through six countries, and had still further to go, till in the seventh country they stopped at the royal palace. In this seventh country ruled three own brothers, who had to wife three own sisters, whose mother was a witch. When they stopped in front of the palace, the seer said to his servant: 'Do you hear? you stay here, and I will go in to ascertain whether the kings are at home; for the horse with the sun is in their possession—the youngest rides upon him.'

Therewith he transformed himself into a green bird, and, flying on the gable of the eldest queen's roof, flew up and down and pecked at it until she opened the window and let him into her chamber. And when she let him in he perched on her white hand, and the queen was as delighted with him as a little child. 'Ah, what a dear creature you are!' said she, as she played with him; 'if my husband were at home he would indeed be delighted with you; but he won't come till evening; he has gone to visit the third part of his country.'

All at once the old witch came into the room, and, seeing the bird, screamed to her daughter, 'Wring the accursed bird's neck, for it's making you bleed!' 'Well, what if it should make me bleed? it's such a dear; it's such an innocent dear!' answered the daughter. But the witch said: 'Dear innocent mischief! here with him! let me wring his neck!' and dashed at it. But the bird cunningly transformed itself into a man, and, pop! out through the door, and they didn't know whither he had betaken himself.

Afterwards he again transformed himself into a green bird, flew on the gable of the middle sister, and pecked at it till she opened the window for him. And when she let him in he flew on to her white hand, and fluttered

from one hand to the other. 'Oh, what a dear creature you are!' cried the queen, smiling; 'my husband would indeed be delighted with you if he were at home; but he won't come till to-morrow evening; he has gone to visit two thirds of his kingdom.'

Thereupon the witch burst into the room. 'Wring the accursed bird's neck! wring its neck, for it's making you bleed!' cried she as soon as she espied it. 'Well, what if it should make me bleed? it's such a dear, such an innocent dear!' replied the daughter. But the witch said: 'Dear innocent mischief! here with it! let me wring its neck!' and was already trying to seize it. But at that moment the green bird changed itself into a man, ran out through the door, and disappeared, as it were, in the clap of a hand, so that they didn't know whither he had gone.

A little while afterwards he changed himself again into a green bird and flew on the gable of the youngest queen's roof, and flew up and down, and pecked at it until she opened the window to him. And when she had let him in he flew straight on to her white hand, and made himself so agreeable to her that she played with him with the delight of a child. 'Ah, what a dear creature you are!' said the queen; 'if my husband were at home he would certainly be delighted with you, but he won't come till the day after to-morrow at even; he has gone to visit all three parts of his kingdom.'

At that moment the old witch came into the room. 'Wring, wring the accursed bird's neck!' screamed she in the doorway, 'for it is making you bleed.' 'Well, what if it should make me bleed, mother? it is so beautiful, so innocent,' answered the daughter. The witch said, 'Beautiful innocent mischief! here with him! let me wring his neck!' But at that moment the bird changed itself into a man, and pop! out through the door, so that none of them saw him more.

Now the seer knew where the kings were, and when they would arrive. He went to his servant and ordered him to follow him out of the town. On they went with rapid step till they came to a bridge, over which the kings were obliged to pass.

Under this bridge they stayed waiting till the evening. When at even the sun was sinking behind the mountains, the clatter of a horse was heard near the bridge. It was the eldest king returning home. Close to the bridge his horse stumbled over a log of wood, which the seer had thrown across the bridge. 'Ha! what scoundrel was that who threw this log across the road?' exclaimed the king in anger. Thereat the seer sprang

out from under the bridge and rushed upon the king for 'daring to call him a scoundrel,' and, drawing his sword, attacked him. The king, too, drew his sword to defend himself, but after a short combat fell dead from his horse. The seer bound the dead king on the horse, and gave the horse a lash with the whip to make him carry his dead master home. He then withdrew under the bridge, and they waited there till the next evening.

When day a second time declined towards evening, the middle king came to the bridge, and, seeing the ground sprinkled with blood, cried out, 'Somebody's been killed here! Who has dared to perpetrate such a crime in my kingdom?' At these words the seer sprang out from under the bridge and rushed upon the king with drawn sword, exclaiming, 'How dare you insult me? Defend yourself as best you can!' The king did defend himself, but after a brief struggle yielded up his life under the sword of the seer. The seer again fastened his corpse upon the horse, and gave the horse a lash with the whip to make him carry his dead master home. They then withdrew under the bridge and waited till the third evening came.

The third evening, at the very setting of the sun, up darted the youngest king on the sun-horse, darted up with speed, for he was somewhat late; but when he saw the red blood in front of the bridge, he stopped, and gazing at it exclaimed, 'It is an unheard-of villain who has dared to murder a man in my kingdom!' Scarcely had these words issued from his mouth when the seer placed himself before him with drawn sword, sternly bidding him defend himself, 'for he had wounded his honour.' 'I don't know how,' answered the king, 'unless it is you that are the villain.' But as his adversary attacked him with a sword, he, too, drew his, and defended himself manfully.

It had been mere play to the seer to overcome the first two kings, but it was not so with this one. Long time they fought, and broke their swords, yet victory didn't show itself either on the one side or on the other. 'We shall effect nothing with swords,' said the seer, 'but do you know what? Let us turn ourselves into wheels and start down from the hill; the wheel which breaks shall be the conquered.' 'Good!' said the king; 'I'll be a cart-wheel, and you shall be a lighter wheel.' 'Not so,' cunningly said the seer; 'you shall be the lighter wheel, and I will be the cart-wheel;' and the king agreed to it. Then they went up the hill, turned themselves into wheels, and started downwards. The cart-wheel flew to pieces, and bang! right into the lighter wheel, so that it all smashed up. Immediately the seer arose out of the cart-wheel and joyfully exclaimed, 'There you are, the victory is mine!' 'Not a bit of it, sir brother!' cried the king, placing himself in front of the seer; 'you have only broken my fingers. But do you know what? Let us make ourselves into flames, and the flame which burns up

the other shall be the victor. I will make myself into a red flame, and do you make yourself into a bluish one.’ ‘Not so!’ interrupted the seer; ‘you make yourself into a bluish flame, and I will make myself into a red one.’ The king agreed to this also. They went into the road to the bridge, and, changing themselves into flames, began to burn each other unmercifully. Long did they burn each other, but nothing came of it. Thereupon, by coincidence, up came an old beggar with a long gray beard, a bald head, a large scrip at his side, leaning upon a thick staff. ‘Old father!’ said the bluish flame, ‘bring some water and quench this red flame; I’ll give you a penny for it.’ The red flame cunningly exclaimed, ‘Old father! I’ll give you a shilling if you’ll pour the water on this bluish flame.’ The old beggar liked the shilling better than the penny, brought water and quenched the bluish flame. Then it was all over with the king. The red flame turned itself into a man, took the sun-horse by the bridle, mounted on his back, called the servant, thanked the beggar for the service he had rendered, and went off.

In the royal palaces there was deep grief at the murder of the two kings; the entire palaces were draped with black cloth, and the people crowded into them from all quarters to gaze at the cut and slashed bodies of the two elder brothers, whose horses had brought them home. The old witch, exasperated at the death of her sons-in-law, devised a plan of vengeance on their murderer, the seer. She seated herself with speed on an iron rake, took her three daughters under her arms, and pop! off with them into the air.

The seer and his servant had already got through a good part of their journey, and were then crossing desert mountains, a treeless waste. Here a terrible hunger seized the servant, and there wasn’t even a wild plum to assuage it. All of a sudden they came to an apple-tree. Apples were hanging on it; the branches were all but breaking under their weight; their scent was beautiful; they were delightfully ruddy, so that they almost offered themselves to be eaten. ‘Praise be to God!’ cried the delighted servant; ‘I shall eat one of those apples with an excellent appetite.’ ‘Don’t attempt to gather one of them!’ cried the seer to him; ‘wait, I’ll gather some for you myself.’ But instead of plucking an apple, he drew his sword and thrust it mightily into the apple-tree; red blood spouted out of it. ‘There,’ said he, ‘you would have come to harm if you had eaten any of those apples, for the apple-tree was the eldest queen, whose mother placed her there to put us out of this world.’

After a time they came to a spring; water clear as crystal bubbled up in it, all but running over the brim and thus attracting wayfarers. ‘Ah!’ said the servant, ‘if we can’t get anything better, let us at any rate have a drink of this good water.’ ‘Don’t venture to drink of it!’ shouted the seer; ‘but stay, I’ll get you some of it.’ Yet he didn’t

get him any water, but thrust his drawn sword into the midst of it; it was immediately discoloured with blood, which began to flow from it in mighty waves. 'That is the middle queen, whose mother placed her here to put us out of this world,' said the seer, and the servant thanked him for his warning, and went on, would he, would he, in hunger and thirst, whithersoever the seer led him.

After a time they came to a rose-bush, which was red with delightful roses, and filled the air round about with their scent. 'Oh, what beautiful roses!' said the servant; 'I never saw such beauties in all my life. I'll go and gather a few of them; I will at any rate comfort myself with them if I can't assuage my hunger and thirst.' 'Don't venture to gather one of them!' cried the seer; 'I will gather them for you.' With that he cut into the bush with his sword; red blood spurted out, as if he had cut the vein of a human being. 'That is the youngest queen,' said the seer to his servant, 'whom her mother, the witch, placed here with the intention of taking vengeance upon us for the death of her sons-in-law.' They then went on.

When they crossed the frontier of the dark realm, flashes flew in all directions from the horse's forehead, and everything came to life again, beautiful regions rejoiced and blossomed with the flowers of spring. The king didn't know how to thank the seer sufficiently, and offered him the half of his kingdom as a reward, but he declined it. 'You are king,' said he; 'rule over the whole realm, and I will return to my cottage in peace.' He took leave and departed.

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