

The Folk- and Fairy-Tales of Ludwig Bechstein: Clear Moon

The cat listened with pleasure to the tale of her friend the snake, and when it had finished she said, “No animal species has to suffer so much from human ingratitude as we poor cats. As these humans make you snakes into symbols of falseness, ingratitude, and malignity, so do they with us, and therefore the two of us act wisely in sticking together and maintaining friendship with one another. People always say, ‘copycat’ and ‘hellcat,’¹ and more such honorary titles are bestowed on us. One of their numerous vices – theft – humans have called mousing² after our profession, our food instinct, that was placed in us by the Creator, of catching mice, which is just downright disgraceful of them; and finally, they have conceived the tall tale that their evil witch-women and Devil’s-confederates were able to transform themselves into such a noble and beautiful creature as a cat; this has led to many people taking every cat to be a witch, through which saintly simplicity many thousands of our species have suffered the cruellest of deaths. I could tell you such tales, in which we are supposed to have played a role as witches, to my dying day, and still I would not have made an end of them.

I shall tell you only *one* such tale, which does not have such cruel touches as the hacking off of paws or heads that so many others do, but in which mention is rather made of our gift for beautiful song and our delight in contemplating the star-studded heavens. I firmly believe that the *Sirens* of Antiquity were merely singing cats who lived in seas or meres, and so were genuine *merecats*,³ whereas spiteful mankind has conferred the name of a

¹ The German has “falsche Katze” and “Katzenfalschheit” which mean “two-faced” and “deceitfulness,” and were usually applied to women.

² The German verb “mausen” means both “to catch mice” and “to filch.”

³ Bechstein makes a cruel pun on “Meerkatze,” which literally means “sea-cat” but is actually a guenon – the ugliest kind of monkey, according to the original text.

beautiful animal that is no longer extant on a kind of mongoose. It is also a well-known tradition and truth among us that the gleam of our eyes at night is nothing other than starlight, which we imbibe from the very first opening of our eyes; that is why we can also see at night, and for us, the most favoured creatures on the face of the earth, there is no darkness; and although we slink through the night, yet we never slink in the dark, and it is just as fatuous of humans to designate us as symbols of spiritual darkness as it is when they do this with owls, who share with us that blessing of constant clear sight. But far be it from me to praise myself and my kind; in truth, I have no need of self-applause. My tale is this:

Once upon a time there lived a man whose house had a fine, spacious balcony, from which one could enjoy a splendid prospect of the town in which he lived and of the whole surrounding area. Close to this balcony was the man's summer bedchamber, and glass doors led out from it on to a belvedere decorated with flowerpots and small trees in wooden tubs.

One glorious summer's night, when the full moon was shining with a brilliant light and the sky was thick with stars, the man was awakened by heavenly melodies which were sounding very near at hand. He rose from his bed and looked out onto his balcony through a pane of the glass window, and he was greatly astonished to perceive a large party of beautiful ladies, some dressed in white, some in coloured or dark clothes, but all of the most agreeable appearance, sitting around the table that ordinarily stood on the balcony and singing, with the most delightful voices, a refrain which ran:

‘We’re drinking sweeter wine tonight
Than Burgundy wine,
Than wine of Champagne,
We’re drinking the clear moonlight!’

Be that as it may, this delicate company seemed not to disdain bodily refreshment; at least, the man saw that the company of women in question were also savouring earthly wine and exquisite dishes. As he was a confirmed bachelor and lived in the house quite alone but for some old servants, he had absolutely no idea who all these Madams and Misses were, or where in the world they had come from, or why they had come to him of all people. In the end, it seemed to him to be a lovely dream, but his feeling vividly awake argued against this, and so he thought to himself: ‘I am, after all, the master of this house, I have a right to enter this company, where I shall soon hear what strange occasion has led them to me.’ So the man unlatched the glass door and walked out towards the ladies quite at his ease and with a friendly greeting. At sight of him, they all immediately rose from their seats, and a very charming young girl in a snow-white dress, with blond hair and rose-red little mouth and little hands, walked up to him and said, ‘Your gracious forgiveness, noble Sir, for the liberty we have taken of celebrating this beautiful, blissful May night on your balcony, and do not take it amiss if our song has perchance disturbed your slumber. Join us, have a seat, have some cakes, have some wine!’

The man did not know what to make of it all; the lovely little maiden’s charming prattle had stopped all the questions on his lips, he sat down with the company at the round table, and showed no disinclination to accept a

proffered glass of champagne; and as he was drinking with them, the ladies now sang a slightly altered version of their ditty:

‘We’re drinking the choicest wines tonight,
Burgundy wine!
Wine of Champagne!
And the clear, the clear, moonlight!’

The white-clad maiden snuggled up to the man so very confidently, like a young daughter to a father whom she loves, and offered him some cake; he took some of this also, but it did not quite please his palate – there was something missing – so he said, ‘Ladies! Might I possibly ask you in God’s name for a pinch of salt?’

No sooner were these words spoken than the man suddenly heard, in place of the delightful singing, an uproarious hubbub of cats’ voices, to whose delicate, melodic and incomparable euphony the ears of coarse humans are completely deaf, and for which they have no inherent sense – and just so did he see the entire company become *cats*, including his own, which had only a moment before been the beautiful lady in white who was celebrating her natal day. The man saw the cats leap from all sides of the balcony up on to the roof, run quickly along the ridges, and before he could say Jack Robinson they had all vanished, along with glasses, plates, wine and cake – everything but the little piece of cake that he held in his hand, and which was nothing but a bit of stale matzo. His own cat had fled through the window of the balcony-door into his bedchamber, which he strode back into in a rage, and he reached for a rattan cane to repay with

ingratitude the hospitality he had been so kindly shown. Now when the man swept under the bed with his cane, the white cat hissed and yowled fearfully, sprang out from under the bed and through the window again, smashing a second pane into shards, out onto the balcony, onto the roof – and never came back. As the man frequently told his friends what had befallen him with the cats, singing the refrain to them on each occasion and swearing that he would extirpate catkind, so his friends had a good laugh at him and mockingly named him *Clear-Moon* and *Herod-of-the-Cats* until the end of his days.”

Next, and Finally: *Sevenskin*