

The Folk- and Fairy-Tales of Ludwig Bechstein: **Sevenskin**

When the cat had finished narrating her fairy-tale, the wife of the woodcutter, who had been attentively listening along, spoke up: “I know plenty of such stories. Whether they are all true, I cannot say. And with regard to your story, my good snake, about a woman who fed and reared one of your relatives at her breast, I know a far finer one, of a woman who even brought a snake into the world and had to nurse it as her child.” The cat and the snake were eager to hear this story, and they asked the woman to tell it to them.

“Once upon a time there was a Count,” the woman began thereupon, “who was very rich and had a very beautiful and affectionate wife, who loved him tenderly, but they were without child, and because of that, the Count loved his wife much less than she loved him; and besides, his manners were somewhat rough and ready, even if he did not really mean any harm. And so he constantly called his wife, who strove to keep in his good books through congeniality, humility, and close-lipped demeanour, an eelskin, a toady, a slippery snake, and the like; and every now and then the woman would weep at this and say, ‘You sin when you liken me to a snake – may God refrain from punishing you for that one day!’ And the Count laughed.

Then it happened, some years later, that the prospect of a child came the way of the couple, whereupon the Count behaved like a changed man who overwhelmed his wife with kindness – but then a hard fate fell upon them both – the Countess brought into the world not a child but – a *snake*. The Count was beside himself with rage and fury, and his wife was near to death. ‘Are you a snake now, Snake-mother, or are you not?’ he roared. ‘You are a witch, a Devil’s paramour, a purring dissembler! You

must die, and the snakeskin brat you bore must die with you!’ – However, through pleas and entreaties the Countess brought it about that he did not have her and the snake killed, and the horror with which she looked at the snake was now mingled with a mother’s love. However, the Count scarcely concerned himself with her and no longer regarded her as his wife; she was not allowed to leave her isolated chambers and no one was allowed in to her except for the most essential servants. In her seclusion, the Countess put the snake to her breast and nursed it with her milk, and she gradually grew accustomed to it and came to love it as a child. She also had the same recurring dream over and again: the snake was a handsome boy who had taken on the form of a serpent because of all the times she had been wept with dismay when her husband had called her a snake. Therefore, she looked after the snake carefully and faithfully, and at length she saw, to her joy, that it had grown large and prospered; now it would sit quietly on her lap, now it would raise its slender neck with the little head and the clever flashing eyes to her mouth and brush against it, as with a kiss, and it always sent a shudder of delight running through her when the snake, just for an instant, let its quick tongue slide between her lips; and now it would blithely wriggle around the room making dancing movements like a happy child at play.

Time passed, monotonously enough, for the confined Countess; a full twenty years had now gone by, the snake had long attained to its full growth, and the Countess gave serious thought to her death – and what would then become of the snake? Then one evening, the snake, who had never yet uttered a word in all these long years, opened its mouth and said, to the unspeakable surprise of the Countess: ‘Dearest mother! I have now

passed the twentieth year of my life, and I would wish to get married. You would place me under an obligation of the deepest gratitude, were you to procure a bride for me; from which social station is all the same to me, just as long as she is steadfast and worthy.’ The Countess promised to fulfil her son’s wish and sent out marriage emissaries, but from all quarters she received answers which declined, and often derided, her proposal. Lithe suitors, it was said, were seen with pleasure, but a slithering suitor was not the order of the day. Such a union was really all too unequal – one would not be unhappy to have a golden snake-ring on one’s finger, or a golden snake as a bracelet, but a snake around one’s whole body – that was not to be borne. This greatly distressed the Countess, and as a wedding-match could not be found at all, yet her son repeated his supplication, so the Countess thought of her henkeeper, a brisk young girl, and tried to persuade her to the union. But the maid said, ‘What use can a lounge be to me? Such a one only eats and never works! I trust myself to find me a suitor who has hands and feet!’

But the Countess gave her to understand that there need be no more talk of work if she married the Count’s son, that she would become rich and be able to parade around in clothes of gold. If she showed the wisdom of snakes, she would accept the snake; and if she wished to stay with the hens, then she was a silly goose.

A little coaxing can go a long way – says the proverb – and the henkeeper said she would think the matter over and sleep on it. Good advice would come by night. And it did come. After a pious evening-prayer the maid fell asleep and at once had a dream in which an angel appeared and whispered to her, ‘Take him, take him, you won’t find a better! You’re

the one appointed to release him.' And it whispered to her what she should do on the wedding evening. The girl took careful note of everything, and the next morning she announced to the Countess her decision to comply with her fervent wish. The snake's mother was delighted to hear this and made all the preparatory arrangements, yet the wedding was to be – for good reasons – celebrated privately. Now when the young couple were together, the snake said to the bride, 'Get undressed!' – 'No!' said the bride, 'you get undressed first!' Then the snake gave a hop, wound itself into a circle, bit its tail, and shot out of its skin; but the one underneath was far lovelier, for the old one had been brown and the new one was green; and the snake spoke, 'I hope! Now get undressed!' – 'No, you get undressed!' cried the bride. Then the snake did as on the previous occasion, and slipping out of the green skin so it appeared sky-blue, it said, 'I trust! Now get undressed!'

'No, you get undressed!' cried the bride, for that was the secret the angel had confided to her in dream, and once again the snake obeyed, thereby evincing the most hopeful signs of becoming a good, compliant husband. The blue skin fell from it, and a new rosy-red one emerged, and the snake spoke, 'I love you, and now get undressed!'

'No, you get undressed!' said the bride.

'You demand a great deal, my child!' the snake replied, but it sloughed its skin for the fourth time and now appeared silver all over. 'My heart is pure, like silver! Now get undressed!' said the snake, but the bride again refused to do this, saying once more, 'No! You get undressed!'

Thereupon the snake shed its silver skin and crept out of it with a gloriously refulgent golden skin, saying, 'My heart is true, like gold! Now, finally, get undressed!'

‘No! You get undressed!’ the bride said for the sixth time, and once again the snake obeyed, and it came out of the golden skin, which it cast off, like a living rainbow, glittering and glowing in all colours, with a brilliancy that eyes could hardly bear. ‘Peace be with you and me,’ cried the snake, ‘but I beg you, get undressed now!’

‘No, you get undressed!’ the bride said inexorably. Then the snake shot up high into the air, and in what skin did it appear now? Have a guess.”

“I cannot guess that,” said the snake. “I slough only once a year.”

“And I even less often,” the cat added; “I never shed my skin, I only shed hair.”

“Pah! Into a *human skin!*” cried the narrator. “And it changed at the same time into a human form, and into a handsome and young one at that, and he took his bride in his arms and kissed her and cried, ‘Thank you, you have released me!’

And that was what the angel had whispered to the bride in her dream: *seven times* must she refuse his importunities and turn them back on him, and now he stood before her as the most benevolent of Count’s sons, as the most handsome of knights, and she sank, moved by love, on his breast. That the Countess was delighted at the transformation; that her husband became reconciled with her and took pleasure in his son – that all goes without saying.”

And so they told tales, one after the other, the inhabitants of that house in the forest: now the woman, and now the man, or the snake, or the cat; and the husband and wife lived only happy days, reached a ripe old age, and died the one shortly after the other. After that the cat also died, and the snake left the house in which it had felt so much at home.