

The Folk- and Fairy-Tales of Ludwig Bechstein: **The Crowned Adder**



Old grandfathers and grandmothers have often told their grandchildren and great-grandchildren tales of beautiful snakes which bore little golden crowns on their head; the old ones called them by various names, such as Adder-King, Crown-Adder, Snake-Queen and suchlike, and they said that the possession of such a crown brings great good fortune.

A pious, kind-hearted maid was in the service of a miserly farmer, and in his cowshed there also lived a crowned adder, which could occasionally be heard singing quite enchantingly at night, for these adders have the gift of singing more beautifully than the best songbirds. Now when the faithful maid came into the shed and milked the cows or fed them or strewed their litter for them, which she did with great care, for her master's cattle meant the world to her, then the snake, which was as white as the

whitest of mice, would sometimes crawl out of the crack in the wall where it lived and look with intelligent eyes at the busy maid, and she always had the impression that the snake wanted something from her. And then she made it a habit to put some udder-warm cow's milk in a saucer and lay it down for the snake, and it drank the milk with great relish while twisting and turning its little head, and its crown glittered like a diamond or a carbuncle, shining ever so brightly in the dark cowshed.

The good maid took great delight in the white snake, and she perceived that, ever since she had started to give it milk to drink, her master's cows had visibly flourished, giving far more milk, always being healthy, and bringing adorable calves into the world – all of which she saw with the greatest pleasure.

Then one day, it so happened that the farmer walked into the cowshed just as the Crowned Adder was licking up the drop of milk that the good maid had put down for it, and because his stinginess and greed knew no bounds he flared up as furiously as if the poor maid had given away milk by the bucketful.

"You villainous good-for-nothing maid that you are!" yelled the angry farmer. "This is how you treat your master's goods and chattels? Are you not ashamed of your sin, feeding such a venomous worm, which drains milk from the cows' udders in the night in any case, and habituating it to the cowshed? Has anyone ever heard of the like? I could almost believe you're a wicked witch, up to your devilish tricks with this worm of Satan!"

The poor maid could meet this stream of harsh reproaches only with a copious flood of tears; however, the farmer did not care a jot that she was weeping, but rather yelled and bickered more and more, working himself

into a full fury, and forgetting all of the maid's faithful service and all of her hard work, he continued to rail and rage: "Out the house, I say, out the house! And on the spot! I don't need a snake as a boarder! I don't need any milk-thieves or witch-girls! Pack your bundle this moment, this very moment! And see to it that you clear off out this village and never show your face here again, or I'll report you to the authorities, and you'll be imprisoned and get a proper whipping, you nefarious jezebel!"

At being so harshly scolded, the maid ran sobbing out of the cowshed, went up to her room, packed her clothes and tied up her bundle, and then walked out the house and passed over the yard. Then she felt a stab in her heart; she had heard her favourite cow lowing in the cowshed. – The farmer had gone on his way; she entered the cowshed one last time to secretly and tearfully bid farewell to her beloved cattle, for devout servants grow as fond of the cattle of their master and mistress as if they were their own: for which reason it is said that, in the first year of service a maid says, "My master's cow," in the second, "Our cow," and in the third and every succeeding year, "My cow."

And there stood the maid in the cowshed, crying her eyes out and stroking every cow one last time, and her favourite licked her hand one last time – and the snake with the crown came crawling up.

"Farewell, you poor worm, from now on no one will feed you." Then the snake rose up as if it wanted to lay its head in her hand, and suddenly the adder's crown fell into the girl's hand and the snake glided out of the cowshed, which it had never done before; that was a sign that it too was leaving the house where it would thereafter be grudged even a little drop of milk.

Now the poor maid went on her way, not knowing how rich she was. She did not know the great virtue of the adder's crown. Whoever possesses it and has it on their person will find that they prosper in everything they do, they will be pleasing in everyone's eyes, and nothing but honour and joy will come their way.



Outside the village, the departing maid met the rich mayor's son, whose father had recently died, the handsomest young lad in the village, and love for the maid instantly flamed up in his heart, and he greeted her and asked her: Whither was she going, and why had she left her service? After she had poured out her sorrows to him, he bid her go to his mother and just say that he had sent her. Now when the maid came to the old mayoress and delivered the message with which the mayor's son had charged her, the woman put her trust in her at once and retained her in the house; and that evening, when the serving-lads and the maids of the rich farmers came to eat, the newly-engaged maid had to say grace, and it seemed to all present that the words of the prayer were flowing from the lips of a holy angel, and everyone was moved by a feeling of wondrous devotion and felt a great love for the maid. And when the meal was over, and the pious maid had spoken the evening-prayer, and the farmhands had

left the parlour, the rich mayor's son took the penniless maid's hand, walked with her up to his mother, and said, "Mother, give me and her your blessing – for I shall take her to wife and none other. She has quite simply bewitched me!"

"She has bewitched us all," replied the old mayoress. "She is as pious as she is beautiful, and as humble as she is impeccable. I bless you and her in God's name and am heartily glad to take her as my daughter-in-law."

And so did the poor maid become the richest woman in the village, and, on top of that, a blissfully happy one.

But for that miserly farmer who had become so incensed about a few drops of milk and driven the most faithful of maids out of his house, things rapidly went to pot. All his good fortune had departed with the Crowned Adder. He had to sell first his cattle, then his fields; and everything was bought by the rich mayor's son, and his wife led the dear cows, which were now her own, decorated with green wreaths into her cowshed, and stroked them and let them lick her hands again and milked and fed them with her own hands. While thus occupied she suddenly saw the white snake again. Then she quickly took out the little crown and said, "It is nice of you to come to me. Now you shall have fresh milk every day, as much as you want, and here is your crown, which you may take back with a thousand thanks for the great help it gave me. I need it no longer now, for I am rich and happy through love, through fidelity, and through diligence."

Then the white snake took back its little crown and lived in the young woman's cowshed, and over her whole estate there rested peace, happiness, and the blessing of the Lord.