

The Folk- and Fairy-Tales of Ludwig Bechstein: **The Golden Egg**

Once upon a time in a town, there was a very rich merchant who had three grown-up daughters, and all three of them had a pretty figure, and they were also good and modest girls, whereas others in such favourable circumstances are sometimes very arrogant and trickish. That dapper suitors soon endeavoured to court the beautiful rich girls, was only natural; but the girls were shy and reserved, and so, to be brief, no weddings were realised. But one day, when the rich merchant's wife was attending a lavish dress ball with her three beautiful daughters, one of the young gentlemen present, who appeared to be very refined and graceful, was particularly attentive towards the merchant's eldest daughter, dancing with her many times and speaking many sweet words to her, and he was so fortunate as to win her love. At parting, he was exceedingly obliging and amiable towards mother and daughters, and he was readily granted permission to pay them a visit on the following morning. When morning came, the young man dressed himself even more daintily than on the previous evening and arrived at the merchant's house, where he was warmly received. And in no time at all he was the betrothed of the eldest daughter, and the wedding was also not long postponed, for the bridegroom was in a great hurry to return to his home, which lay, according to him, a great long distance away. Now when the sumptuous and joyful wedding celebrations were concluded, the new son-in-law said to his father-in-law: "I am heartily sorry that I must take my beloved wife so very far away from her dear parents and her beloved home, but there is nothing to be done about it, I must return to my country; but I shall assuredly see to it, as far as I possibly can, that she will be satisfied with her life there, and she will find her new home agreeable

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and pleasant.” The parents bowed to necessity, and the father said to the mother, “What do you think, dear wife, about giving our daughter her entire inheritance now? For the distance is too great for us to have any hopes of seeing her again any time soon.” The mother said, “You’re right, dear husband, I mark that our son-in-law is very rich, and this will keep the balance even between our daughter and him; for I would always have like draw to like. If the wife does not arrive empty-handed, she will be treated all the more kindly by her husband.”

When the journey was underway, the good parents sent six carriages full of goods and money and lovely clothes and moveables with their daughter. The journey lasted a long time, and the region became ever more rugged, the forests ever larger and darker; then at last, before a large, dismal building in the depths of a frightful forest, the young husband gave the order to halt; this was his home, and the new home of the beautiful young wife, who was almost a little perplexed that all around her looked so very gloomy; but the husband contrived to lift his dear wife’s spirits in next to no time, and now that they were in the house, having climbed up the steps, she perceived to her delight that the interior of the house was not gloomy at all but really charming, and richly and beautifully decorated. She passed from one room into the next and found everything fine and dandy; but one room-door, which was heavy with gold and on whose ledge there lay a large golden key, was not opened for her by her husband in spite of all her pleas. He said, “I cannot take you in there, my dear, I have something inside which it would not avail you to see, nor would it in the least interest you if I were to show you it.” Then she desisted from her entreaties, but she

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was secretly curious to know what could possibly be in this room that she was not on any account allowed to see.

Now it so happened that one day, when several weeks had passed, the young husband went hunting, and as he was leaving he said, “Dear wife, I’ll give you a plaything that you can pleasantly while away the time with, but you must not by any means get a stain on it,” and he gave her a little golden egg, which pleased her greatly. When the huntsman had gone and the lonely wife had played with the egg for a while, she thought, “Well, how about it? Now I’m alone, I will have a look at what is hidden in that room”; and she took her egg and walked rapidly to that golden door, took the golden key down from the ledge, and was just about to unlock – but at that moment a large parrot came out from under the threshold, positioned itself before her, and said in a hollow voice:

“Take care of the egg, oh take good care,
Or you’ll pay the price, with head and hair.”

But the curious young wife pushed the warning bird aside, saying, “Stupid bird, what is it you want?” and she unlocked the door. But what a shock! There was a large vat filled with blood, with a block and an axe next to it, and at the side was a long table on which were placed nothing but dead women’s heads; and alas, the shock made the wife drop her golden egg in the blood. She quickly took it back out, locked the door, and hurried away, horrified; in her room she carefully wiped her egg so that her husband, on his return, would not see any bloodstains, but as the blood came off, so did the gold, and so, to the wife’s untold distress, the egg was ruined, and when her husband returned from the hunt, it immediately

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betrayed what had happened while he was out. Then the huntsman fiercely knitted his brows, seized the trembling woman, dragged her to that gruesome room, and said, gripping the axe, "As you craved, foolish woman, to see what I forbade you to, so shall you pay for it," and he chopped off her head and placed it on the table beside the other ones.

A short time later the cruel man set out and travelled again to the town where his rich parents-in-law lived; and when he arrived there, he broke out into lamentable cries: he had lost his dear wife to death and he was inconsolable. This was a grievous blow to her parents and sisters; but after several weeks their sorrow abated and the evil young man married the middle sister. She fared not a jot better than the eldest. Out of curiosity she opened that door; she did not heed the parrot's warning; she stained the golden egg with blood and was then killed by her inhuman husband just as her sister had been, and in the same way that many others had met their death, as one could see from the number of severed heads that were placed upon the table.

Once again the son-in-law arrived in deep mourning at his parents'-in-law's, reporting the death of his second wife and pretending to be in the depths of despair. But after several weeks he again recovered from the blow dealt him by bitter fate and spoke to his parents-in-law: "My dear parents, my ignominious fate has heartily distressed me, and I am sure I would never see another joyful hour on this earth if I had to spend my days alone and far from you; so give me your blessing one last time, and give me your youngest daughter, my dear sister-in-law, to wife, that she may be the comforting angel to my sorrow." And this time also the parents

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consented and the wedding was soon performed, and once again a substantial marriage-portion followed the two newlyweds into the far distance. Once they had arrived, the husband again took his young wife through the rooms of his castle and when they came to the golden door, he said again, "Dear wife, I cannot open this room to you, I have something inside that it would not avail you to see, let us go back." Then she wisely thought, "I really must learn what is inside, but I must be careful and on my guard." Now when her husband had gone out hunting one day after giving her a golden egg as a plaything to pass the time with, she thought, having played with the egg for a while, "Well, now I'm alone, I will see what is hidden in that room," and she hurried there with her golden egg, took the key down from the ledge and was about to unlock the door. Meanwhile the parrot had again shot out from under the threshold and it began to admonish in a hollow voice:

"Take care of the egg, oh take good care,
Or you'll pay the price, with head and hair."

The young wife paid heed, and taking out a linen handkerchief she wrapped the egg in it and laid it down before the door, then she unlocked and beheld what was hidden there with shock and horror. She instantly recognised the heads of her two sisters and severe grief cut her to the quick; "however," she thought, "you must act speedily and prudently if you are to escape the clutches of this villain and bring his evil deeds to light" – and she swiftly took the heads of her two sisters, hurried away, and hid them in a secret place. Then she fetched her golden egg and said to the parrot, who was still sitting beside it, "Dear bird, I thank you for your warning,

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I shall see to it that feed and drink will always be given you, and from this time on you shall live no longer under this gloomy threshold, but in my cheerful room.” But the bird shook its heavy head and replied, “I have no need of feed or any other habitation, for my life was lived out long since, and only the golden gleam of this egg was able to rouse me to the light of day, that I might appear to give warning to the unfortunate. But now this time will be over. You will give the villain his just deserts, at the same time executing the revenge I swore on him when he stole my beloved first egg from me, causing me to die of sorrow. Yet my soul found no rest in death, and so I remained under this threshold and awoke every time the golden gleam of my egg illuminated me. But there is one request you can carry out as a way of thanking me: help me to this beloved egg of mine that I may hatch it, then I shall be able to sleep the sleep of death.” The young woman spoke: “That shall be done, you shall receive your egg, dear bird, and your revenge will be satisfied.” Then she went to her room, and when her husband came home from the hunt he found his wife playing with the beautiful golden egg. The evil man did not suspect that he had been discovered; and when, some time later, his dear wife wished to make a journey to her parents, he gave his consent and did not trouble himself with that atrocious room. Before the journey began, the wife asked her husband for the golden egg, and he gave it her as a present; and the woman gave it to the parrot so it could hatch the egg and find peace.

Now they set out on their journey and soon reached the woman’s dear home, where they were received with great delight; on the next day, a feast was held and many friends invited, and when the guests had merrily

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returned home and the son-in-law, intoxicated with wine, had fallen into a deep sleep, the daughter signalled to her parents, led them to her room, where she had laid out her packets, showed them the heads of her two sisters, and revealed to them the deeds of the cruel and evil man who had so abominably outwitted and deceived them. That was a bitter pain for the old parents! "But let us act with dispatch!" said the daughter, and she hurriedly sent for the apparitors and had the drunken man put into prison.

The prudent woman had taken the precaution of bringing all the possessions and money of her two sisters as well as her own back home with her, and she now stayed with her old parents, who were stricken with grief for their hapless daughters.

But the evil man in prison thought to escape his fate: taking flight, he hurried back to his robber's castle cautiously and by out-of-the-way paths, and believed himself to be safe there. But after pacing restlessly around his apartments, he finally decided to pay another visit to that ghastly room, and the parrot was sitting on the threshold with its wings spread wide; and when he kicked the bird out of the way and strode into the room, the golden egg rolled after him, burst open, and hatched a mighty snake, which coiled itself around the villain's body in a trice and sank with him deep, deep down in the vat of blood. And the parrot floated lightly aloft, as one released from heavy chains.