

The Folk- and Fairy-Tales of Ludwig Bechstein: **The Hunt of Life**

Once upon a time there was a hunter who entered a forest in a desolate wilderness to hunt. There he came upon the track of an animal, but when he finally discovered the beast he wished he had never set eyes on it, for it was a mighty unicorn, and it was pitting itself against him. Hurriedly he turned and fled, the unicorn pursuing him all the while, until he came to a sheer rock face, whose precipitous incline was sprayed far below by the waves of a dark lake. In the lake swam a monstrous dragon which violently opened its jaws wide and gaping; suddenly the hunter slipped, and he would have plunged straight down towards the lake and into the dragon's maw had he not held on to a shrub that had sprouted forth from a cleft in the rock. So now the hunter was in an agonising situation. Up above, the terrible unicorn stood like a guard, and down below the horrible sea-serpent lay in wait for his headlong fall. In this plight, his dread and anguish were further heightened, for all of a sudden he espied two mice, a white mouse and a black mouse; they began to gnaw at the roots of the shrub, and the hunter was not able to shoo them away because he had to hold on with both hands. So he was necessarily in a constant state of expectation that the roots would cease to hold the shrub in place. Above them there was a tree from which sweet honey trickled down, and the hunter would have dearly liked to reach this tree, for he supposed he would be freed from his torment thereby; and in thoughts of the tree he forgot all the danger that threatened him. We do not know if he was successfully delivered from his threefold torment, or if the mice gnawed all the way through the shrub's roots.

The ancient author of this tale gives it an allegorical interpretation, as

thus: The hunter – that is man; and the unicorn – that is Death, whom man encounters sooner than he had envisaged and who follows him evermore. The sheer rock face is the earth, and the shrub is life, to which man clings by fragile bonds. The white and the black mice which gnaw at the root of life are day and night, or restless time, which saps our life. The dark lake is Hell, and its dragon is the Devil, who lie in wait for man to fall into their jaws. As for the honey-tree, it is love, that which sweetens life, that which man strives towards, hoping to win it between misery and death, between agony and anguish, heeding no danger; and he finds his earthly bliss when his labours to attain it succeed. But man must be on his guard every day, as the mice gnaw at the roots of life, lest he fall into the Lake of Damnation.