

The Folk- and Fairy-Tales of Ludwig Bechstein: **The Man and the Snake**



Once upon a time there was a man in whose house lived a snake, and it was well looked after by his wife, receiving its food every day. It had its dwelling very close to the hearth, where it was always nice and warm, in a hole in the wall. The man and his wife, in line with the superstition prevailing at that time, had the notion that having a snake in your house brought you luck! Now it happened on a Sunday that the head of the household had a headache, so he stayed in bed that morning, bidding his wife and servants go to church without him. So they all went out, and now it was very quiet in the house, when the snake softly slipped out from its hole and very warily looked all around. This was seen by the man, whose bedroom door stood open, and he wondered to himself at the snake looking around so cautiously, contrary to its usual custom. It crawled from corner to corner and even came to the bedroom and peeped in, but it saw no one, for the master had hidden himself. And now it crept on to the hearth, where there was a pot of soup over the fire, and it hung its head over the pot and spat its poison inside, then secreted itself in its den. The master got up

straightaway, took the pot, and buried it, food, venom and all, in the ground. Now when the time to eat came around, when the snake would habitually come out, the man positioned himself beside the hole with an axe, with the intention, the moment the snake slipped out, to hew its head from its body. But the snake very cautiously stuck its head out of the hole only a tiny way, and when the man struck, it started back as fast as lightning, thus giving proof that her conscience was not clear. A few days later the woman exhorted her husband to make his peace with the snake, it would certainly never do so evil a deed again; the master was willing, and he sent for a neighbour to be witness to his peace alliance with the snake and to draw up a treaty between them, to the effect that the one should be safe from the other. Thereupon they called to the snake and made the proposition to it, but the snake said: "No! Hereafter we cannot associate on a footing of good faith, for when you think of what I did to you in your pot, and when I consider how you hewed at my head with a sharp axe, then neither of us could possibly trust the other. For those reasons we do not belong together; give me safe-conduct, that is all I crave of you, and let me go my way, the further from you the better, while you stay at your ease in your house." And this is what happened.

The raven, after hearing this tale from the mouth of Sambar the mouse, began as follows: "I well understand the lesson that your little tale contains, but consider your character and my sincerity, be less severe, and do not deny me your society. There is a difference between the noble and the ignoble; a beaker made of gold lasts longer than one of glass, and when

a glass cup shatters it is finished, but a gold cup that is damaged does not lose its value. The friendship of wicked and ignoble minds is no friendship at all, but you have a noble disposition, as I have clearly discerned, and so my heart yearns for your friendship, and needs it, and I shall not budge from the entrance to your dwelling, and I shall neither eat nor drink, until you have lent an ear to my request!”

Thereupon Sambar the clever mouse said: “I now accept you as a companion, for I have never yet failed to grant a just request. But you may as well bear in mind that I have not pressed myself on you, also that I am safe from you in my dwelling; I simply desire to be useful to all who desire my help. So do not boast, saying for instance: Ha ha, I have found a careless and stupid mouse! – so that you do not fare like the cock with the fox.”

“How was that?” asked the raven, and so the mouse related a parable:

Next: *The Cock and the Fox*