

The Folk- and Fairy-Tales of Ludwig Bechstein: **The Pearl Queen**

Not far from a peaceful village which lay on the sea-strand and was inhabited mostly by fisher-folk, there appeared on the shore every year, at several fixed times, a maiden of superterrestrial beauty; she would come sailing up in a wondrously beautiful little ship, which looked as if it were made of pure, light-coloured pearls fitted together, and no one knew whence she came, or whither she returned when she disappeared. But the true-hearted fisher-folk were very fond of her, particularly the children, for whom she always scattered a quantity of lovely pearls on the shore before waving to them to pick them up. Then the little ones were assiduous in picking up the pearls, and they delighted in their orieny. And then the fishermen and fisherwomen came bearing a meal for the good and beautiful Pearl Queen: fishes and bread and good wine, and the fair maiden was friendly to all, and ate a few bites and drank a little wine.

And often, at the time when the Fair Unknown would land at the shore, Princes and many nobles came from other, foreign lands to see the beautiful maiden and perhaps wed her; for it was rumoured of her far and wide that she was just as rich in earthly treasures as in bodily beauty. But all had to return home with their wish unfulfilled. The noble maiden required of everyone who wooed her that he first pass three tests she had set him. And up to the present, these had proved too difficult, too high to reach, for everyone. No one was able to accomplish them, and so the noble suitors had to fall back and, a little ashamed and disgruntled, go back home. The first task that the maiden set was to guess what colour of hair she had, for she always kept her head heavily veiled; no one had yet guessed correctly, even though all colours – black, red, blonde, brown, white, green, grey, blue

– had so far been guessed. The second one was to put on the maiden's necklace. If the bright, shining pearls then became dull, it was a bad omen, and the lovely lady would weep, and her tears became pearls just as bright as the ones on the necklace, to which they attached themselves. And when the pearl necklace hung round the maiden's neck again, it shone brightly and wondrously once more. The third task was to guess what the maiden wore on her breast. And no one could guess this. And so no one, even were he the richest Prince, had won the maiden's favour for her to give him her hand and her heart. She remained a mystery. Every ruse to learn some particulars of the maiden herself and of her home remained fruitless; for every time the ship of pearls disappeared on the waters all too quickly from the sight of men. Yet she came back at the fixed time, as friendly and charming as before, and scattered pearls on the shore.

And there was a boy whom she held dearest of all the children; she would take him in her arms and hug him to her heart, and the boy was also very fond of the beautiful, kind lady; but when he grew up, he became abashed and shy, and the time came when he no longer dared to pick up pearls; and most of the time he had to sail and fish with his father on the open sea.

And so the maiden had landed on the shore several times without having seen her dear fisher-boy; and she was saddened, for ah, her heart had chosen this very youth, and she wished nothing more than that this handsome fisher might one day be able to accomplish the three tasks and then follow her to the beautiful Isle of Pearls, her home, for ever. She secretly decided, when she again pushed her ship off the shore without

having seen her beloved fisher-youth, to return that same evening and approach the dear one unseen. And indeed, when the golden moon had risen and was mirrored in the waters, the ship of pearls sailed again through the waves towards the friendly shore, where her beloved had long since lain in the arms of Morpheus in the fisherman's little hut. The fair maiden walked into the chamber and gently leaned over the sleeper, who used only moss for a bed. And she unclasped the pearl necklace from her neck and put it on the youth, and the pearls remained as bright and clear as before – oh, what joy then flowed through her loving heart! She kissed the dear one in blessing and departed, and returned every evening and hung the pearls around the youth's neck every time, and every time the pearls kept their lustre and brilliance. The youth had also fallen deeply in love with the beautiful Pearl Queen, and he was pious and good to boot; only, he was all too shy and timorous to approach her openly.

Now when she was at the youth's bedside one night, he awoke; but as he kept still, she believed him to be asleep. Then she took her pearl-necklace from her neck and put it on him, and wept warm tears on his cheeks, and, throwing back her veil, she took her hair and dried the tears with it. And the youth saw that her hair was *golden*. Then she lifted her neckcloth, and a bright mirror shone on her breast, out of which the youth's image looked, gentle and handsome. But when she departed she was always troubled and sad; for were the bright pearl necklace to become dull around the neck of her beloved fisher only one single time, she would never be able to come close to him again.

And so the appointed time arrived when the beautiful Pearl Queen

disembarked on the shore near the fishing village and, after her usual fashion, scattered pearls for the happy children; and this time many noble Princes and Lords had come to win the rich and beautiful Princess; the fisher-youth also stood, at a distance, and plucked up the courage to approach his idol. Yet it was not his turn until the end, when all the others had, again, retreated from her in shame. Then he modestly stepped forward and asked for the three tasks, and the maiden glowed with joy and gave them to him, and secretly sent imploring looks towards the heavens, that her beloved youth might in fact pass the tests. No one else had been able to accomplish them, after all. The handsome fisher bowed modestly before the fair one and said, "Oh, your hair must be golden." And in an instant her veil had fallen off and her golden locks flowed down. Then the joyful maiden hung the pearl-necklace around the youth's neck and it kept its purity and lustre. And the fisher spoke again: "And your breast must be a pure and beautiful mirror, fair maiden!" And her neckcloth also rustled to the ground in an instant, and the clear mirror on the maiden's breast showed a gentle, handsome image, the image of the youth. Then there rang out from the ship of pearls loud cheering and joyous strains of music, and a circle of beautiful ladies and blooming men joyfully rose up from the ship and received the fair couple, and the lovely little barque of pearls glided away over the crystal-clear water, towards the wondrously delightful Isle of Pearls, the home of the fisher-youth's beloved bride, never, never to return.