

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

Once upon a time a poor shepherd boy lived in a peaceful, pleasantly situated little village. Near the village was a valley and a precious place to which the shepherd boy always drove his flock, and it seemed as if the shepherd had chosen this quiet spot for his favourite retreat. He did not eat his midday meal, nor did he seek rest in the cool shade, until he had come to the beloved place. He was always drawn thither by an unaccountable longing.

The place itself was simple enough: there was only a rough stone, under which a spring murmured and beside which stood a wild pear-tree, overshadowing the stone with its densely foliated branches. Yet the boy felt so happy every time he ate on the stone and drank from the spring, and when the stone became his pillow; and he fancied then that he heard a mysterious singing and sighing beneath the stone; then he would listen, fall into a slumber, and dream. Always he felt as if a secret, celestial happiness were floating around his soul. Whether he were driving the flock to pasture, or he were driving them home in the evening, this unaccountable longing overmastered him; he did not want to gallivant around with the village lads and lasses, lustily singing and flirting when the working day was done, but he preferred to walk in solitude and silence, and even fell into melancholy. But when a beautiful new day dawned again and he went forth with his flock of lambs over meadows and pastures once more, his mood became more and ever more serene as he drew nearer the dear stone and the shade of the precious pear-tree. And while he rested there, playing on his flute, it often came to pass that a silver-white snake crept out from under the stone, and it first huddled up familiarly against his feet, then raised itself upright

and gazed at the shepherd until two large tears trickled from its eyes; then it softly slipped back under the stone. Every time the shepherd felt such a peculiar, such a wondrous sensation. His heart was light and yet inexpressibly wistful.

At length, the shepherd ceased completely to walk among the cheerful crowd of lads and lasses, for their merry, ringing racket was utterly repugnant to him, whereas silent seclusion did him good and became ever dearer to his heart.

On a lovely Sunday in Spring, a Trinity Sunday – which the country folk call “Golden Sunday,” hold in especial esteem, and celebrate with festivities – a merry dance was to be held under the village linden-tree; the silent shepherd boy, driven by that inexpressible longing, turned his steps in the midday-hour towards the secluded valley with the stone and the pear-tree. He cheerfully greeted the cherished place, sat down in silent thought, and listened to the whispering of the leaves and the mysterious chattering under the stone. All of a sudden a brilliant light shone before his eyes and a pang of fear passed trembling through his heart; looking up, he saw a fair figure arrayed in white, like an angel, standing before him with gentle look and folded hands; and his senses enraptured, the shepherd heard a sweet voice whisper to him: “O youth, be not afraid; oh, hear the supplication of an unhappy maiden, and do not push me away from you, and do not flee from my misery. I am a noble Princess, immeasurably rich with hoards of pearls and gold, but for many centuries I have been languishing, enchanted and banished, here, under this stone, and have had to crawl around in a snake’s body. Thus have I often descried you here, and

conceived the hope that you could release me, for you are still pure in heart like a child. And this present hour – the midday hour on Golden Sunday – this hour alone in the whole year is granted me to walk the earth in my true form; and if I should then find a pure-hearted youth, I might request of him that he deliver me. Set me free, dear youth, set me free, by all that is holy, I implore you!” Then the maiden sank down at the shepherd’s feet, clasped them tightly, and looked up at him in tears. The youth’s heart trembled with delight, and he raised the angelic maiden to her feet, stammering out: “Oh tell me, what should I do, how may I set you free, you beautiful angel?” She said, “Come back here at the same time tomorrow, and when I appear to you in my serpentine form, twine myself around you and kiss you three times, then do not be frightened, oh do not be frightened, else must I languish here enchanted for a further hundred years.” At that moment she vanished; and a soft singing and sighing again came forth from under the stone.

On the following day, at the midday hour, the shepherd waited, not without fear, at that place; he besought Heaven for strength and steadfastness at the terrible moment of the serpent’s kiss. And now the snake was twisting itself out, silver-white, from under the stone, and crawling towards the youth, and coiling itself around his body, and raising its head with its bright eyes for a kiss; but the youth stayed strong and bore the three kisses. Then there was a mighty flash, then dreadful thunderclaps rolled around the youth, who had fallen senseless to the ground, and a magical transformation came to pass all around him; and when he came to, he was lying on soft silken pillows in a marvellously decorated room, and

the fair maiden was kneeling before his bed and holding his hand to her heart. "Oh, Heaven, be thanked!" she exclaimed as he opened his eyes, "Oh thank you, my darling youth, for my deliverance, and take as your reward my fair land, and this fair castle with all its precious treasures, and take me as your faithful wife. You shall hereafter be happy and have your fill of pleasures."

And this shepherd became happy and joyful; that heartfelt longing which had so often driven him towards the stone, towards silent seclusion, was gloriously satisfied. He lived apart from the world, in the lap of fortune with his fair wife; and he had no desire to return to the earth, nor to his lambs. But in his village there was great sorrow over the shepherd who had vanished so suddenly; the villagers sought him in the valley, by the stone under the pear-tree where he had gone last, but neither the shepherd nor the stone, nor the spring, nor the pear-tree, were any longer to be found; and never again was the slightest trace of them seen by human eye.