

The Folk- and Fairy-Tales of Ludwig Bechstein: **The Snake Family-Friend**



Once upon a time there was an old married couple who were very poor, for all their hard work, and the husband fed himself and his wife, with whom he lived in a little house close to the forest, through forestry work. He helped to fell trees, house wood, and saw up and chop the wood, and so he was able to collect in the forest the wood he needed for his own use, which he took home on a handcart once or several times a week. However, according to the Forestry Laws, this may be done only with wood that has dried up; poor people must not chop fresh, greening wood off the trees or strip it off with their scythes, or they will be charged with breach of forest-law and punished; and that is a very wise law, for without it, verdant forests would have long since disappeared. Now when the poor woodcutter came into the

forest one day, he saw from a distance, to his great delight, that a strong gale in the night had broken off and cast down a large, withered branch from a stately oak, and he intended to take possession of this branch without further ado. But as the man approached, he was horrified to see a large snake wriggling from the tree towards the branch, so he moved off to the side and collected other wood. On the following day the man went into the forest again, intending to take the branch back with him this time, but the snake had coiled itself around the branch many times, and it raised its small head on its slender neck towards him quite gaily, as if it felt no fear of him and wished to make his acquaintance. The man could have killed the snake easily – indeed, all he had to do was cut off its head with the sharp wood-axe he carried with him – but this man was one of those few sensible countryfolk who, in their simplicity of mind, deem it a sin to kill one of God’s creatures without need or necessity, out of pure wantonness and delight in killing, as so many people do out of ignorance and – what is much worse and much more wicked – out of malice. He chose to give up the branch and gather smaller, wind-fallen wood.

Now when the man came home with his bundle of twigs, he said to his wife, who was helping out in the yard, as he threw off the wood: “Unfortunately, I have not brought back the fine branch I told you about yesterday, the snake had curled all of its body around it.”

“Don’t talk to me about your snake!” said the woman. “I’m glad I didn’t see it, it would have been the death of me.”

No sooner had the woodcutter’s wife said this than she uttered a piercing scream and sprang back appalled, for the snake had suddenly crept out of the faggot, and the sight of it put the woman into a mortal terror.



“But dear wife!” cried the man. “How you do over-react! What are you afraid of? Why, it is not a poisonous snake, it is a harmless house-snake which eats frogs and mice. People say that an *unke* brings luck to a house, perhaps this one will bring it to us; it wouldn’t be before time, for we’ve seen enough days of affliction. There are also examples of men being transformed into lindworms like this, men who had buried treasure and were then obliged to guard the glistening gold in serpent form; perhaps such a treasure will be granted us, so let us not do the snake any harm.”

His wife kept shaking in every limb, and she was barely able to speak a word in reply to her husband, for there has been an aversion to snakes on the part of womankind ever since the beginning of days; as for the snake, it had straight away slipped into the house, and there in the front hall it had come across the cat and bid her good day. The cat had arched its back up high and begun to hiss; the snake had hissed and opened its jaws out wide, which dissuaded the cat from taking any hostile measures against it. “What do you eat?” asked the snake. “I eat mice,” the cat replied.

“I eat mice too,” the snake remarked.

This delicate touch of concurring tendencies placated the cat, and she now asked the snake, “What do you drink?”

“I drink milk, when I can have some!” answered the snake.

“Why, I drink milk too!” cried the cat. “This is just splendid! We are really very well suited.”

After that, the cat and the snake concluded peace and friendship with one another, and the housewife gradually grew accustomed to the latter; and when she gave the cat milk, the snake, which needed very little, drank with the cat out of a little bowl, and between them they caught all the mice – the snake those in the barn and in the cellar, and the cat those in the loft and in the parlour.

Blessings entered the little house in the forest after the snake moved in with the old couple and was suffered to stay: the husband’s daily wage was raised, while the forest-berries, edible mushrooms and healing herbs which the wife gathered and took to town to sell fetched a far higher price than usual; and so the poor people lived in happy contentment, which was a greater benefit to them than the sudden acquisition of wealth would have been. In the evening, when work was done for the day, the two old ones would sometimes sit before the door, in summer, or by the warm stove, in winter, and the wife spun while the cat sat beside her and spun also – not thread, unfortunately – and the snake came along up secret passageways the mice had hollowed out, and then husband and wife listened in as the two animals told each other stories in which cats or snakes always played the leading roles. The snake in particular, being quite old and very experienced, had a great deal to relate, partly what it had experienced itself, and partly what it had heard from its mother and grandmother.

“I do not know if you are familiar with the story of the woman,” said the snake to her friend the cat one evening, “who bore a snake at her

breast for a long time?”

“No, I do not know it; I would be very grateful to you if you told me it,” the cat replied, stroking her head with her right paw, whereupon the snake recounted the following fairy-tale:

Next: *The Snake's Wet-Nurse*