

The Folk- and Fairy-Tales of Ludwig Bechstein: **The Snake with the Golden Key**

In a village there served an honest maid, who tended her cattle most diligently and faithfully; but in the shed where her master's cows lived there also dwelt an *unke*, as snakes or adders are called in many places. A good many people believe that they suck milk from cows and kill them, but others hold them in reverence and believe that they bring good luck and blessings – at least to the cow.

One day, the snake came crawling out and began to speak: "Maiden, you are pious and good, and free from gross sins. You can set me free, and if you do, you will bring great happiness to yourself as you will to me."

"What can I do, what should I do, to set you free?" asked the maid.

"When you come back to the cowshed in three days' time," the snake replied, "you will find me to have grown to a very great length, and you must not be frightened of me but rather bend down so I may coil myself around your neck three times; and I will put a little golden key in your mouth, you must keep a grip of it with your lips, and you must not try to shake me off, or all will miscarry and my hopes shall have been vain."

Everything happened just as the snake had said – unfortunately, so did its last words. On the third day, the maid came into the cowshed, where the *unke* was dreadfully thick and long; it crept around her neck twice and it was so heavy and icy-cold, and so revolting – the maid, who really had shown courage at first, was overcome with horror – and she gave a loud scream and shook the snake, which had a little golden key in its mouth, off her. The golden



key immediately fell out and the snake said: "Unhappy girl! You have deprived me of my deliverance, and yourself of your good fortune. Now I must live as an *unke* in the cowshed for another hundred years, and the great riches I guard, which would have been bestowed upon you, are lost to you." Sadly did the snake creep away, and the timid maid wept.