

The Folk- and Fairy-Tales of Ludwig Bechstein: **The Ungrateful Son**

An old mother had a son who wanted to get married, and he asked her to be so good as to give him her house and land, for he and her future daughter-in-law would mean well by her, treat her as their nearest and dearest, and wait on her hand and foot, so to speak. The old mother had a good heart and a rather simple mind; she did not know the proverb 'Do not get undressed before you go to bed,' and she handed over everything she owned. By way of thanks, she was treated very badly, was no longer mistress over anything, and every morsel of bread she ate was first cut thin enough and then reckoned up before her, and every drop she drank was made as bitter as gall; but the son and daughter-in-law made free and enjoyed themselves to the full.

One day these two were eating a roast turkey with their serving-lad and maid, without having invited their mother to join them; yet she happened to come, although she had to knock, the door being locked. "Hey! The old one's coming, take the bird away! Put it in the oven for the time being and shut the door!" the son commanded the servant, who executed the given order at once. Now the room door was flung open by the son and the poor old mother was scolded: "Well, what's all this? Don't tell me the old dragon is hungry again? Confound you! Here, take it, here's some bread, and now be off with you!"

In tears the old mother tottered out of the room, with a dry morsel of bread; the wicked son slammed the door shut behind her with a loud bang and thundered: "You can't enjoy a bite to eat in peace and free from vexation! I'd just like to know if the old one is going to live for ever?" "Bring the turkey back here!" the son's wife ordered the servant – he opened the

oven-door and sprang three steps back with a horrified yell, and went very white.

“Well, what’s wrong with the witless fool? Has he gone mad?” cried the man, and he commanded the maid to take the turkey out of the oven. She went and put her hand into the oven then instantly screamed with terror, also leaping back. “What’s the meaning of this, you stupid bumpkins?” the master scolded. “And if the Devil himself were sitting inside, I wouldn’t raise such a commotion! You go, wife.” “I?” asked the wife, “I won’t do it, not for the world – thank you; I’m full up.” “So then, I’ll have to take a look myself, and I will, even if the Thunder-God is sitting in there!” cried the man. He got up and went to the oven – ugh! A snake, as thick as an arm and a fathom in length, shot out, and darted at him, and coiled itself around his neck, as cold as ice; and when he strove to take it off, the snake opened its jaws horribly wide, showing its fangs and forked tongue, and neither he nor anyone else might touch it; and when the others made as if to do it harm from a distance, it immediately pulled itself more tightly round his neck, putting the man in danger of suffocation, and he cried out in alarm that they must not touch or hurt the snake.

And the snake did not shift from him; with it around his neck he lay down to sleep, with it around his neck he rose in the morning. Before he could raise a beaker to his lips, the snake would draw the first draught; it licked every mouthful he ate, or bit chunks off, and oh! on top of that, when it opened its jaws there came such a terrible smell from its throat that the man was plunged into one faint after another, and no one could bear to be near him. The first person to run away from him – that was his wife, and yet

it was she who bore the lion's share of the blame for his carrying in his heart the snake of ingratitude towards his aged mother, a snake fouler and more fearful than that worm he now had to carry around his neck as a harrowing chastisement. The servant and maid also ran away; the dog and the cat departed; the bird in the cage croaked it; moths and midges died, the spiders stole away, the mice fled as fast as they possibly could; the bugs marched slowly down the doorposts in long lines and slipped out between the door and hinges – not even the most miserable little louse showed ready devotion and fidelity to the ungrateful son whom the judgement of God had smitten severely – everything that lived fled from him – only *one* living being did not flee from him, but faithfully abided by him, and that was his poor old mother – *she* looked after him, she prayed to God for deliverance for her ungrateful son; and when this was not forthcoming, she finally grasped, without fear and with shaking but strong hands, the threatening, hissing, teeth-baring, poison-breathing snake; and the instant that the mother touched the snake, it fell off her son's neck and – disappeared.

The son flung himself down at his mother's feet and kissed them and the hem of her dress, and cried hot tears of repentance on his faithful mother's hands; and from that time on he began a new life, one full of humility towards her, full of care, full of love, full of obedience, full of complaisance; and she lived long and happily, into extreme old age, with the son whom her strong maternal love had saved for her and for himself.