

The Serpent Wife

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Ukrainian

Intermediate

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There was once a gentleman who had a labourer who never went about in company. His fellow-servants did all they could to make him come with them, and now and then enticed him into the tavern, but they could never get him to stay there long, and he always wandered away by himself through the woods. One day he went strolling about in the forest as usual, far from any village and the haunts of men, when he came upon a huge Serpent, which wriggled straight up to him and said, "I am going to eat thee on the spot!" But the labourer, who was used to the loneliness of the forest, replied, "Very well, eat me if thou hast a mind to!" -- Then the Serpent said, "Nay! I will not eat thee; only do what I tell thee!" And the Serpent began to tell the man what he had to do. "Turn back home," it said, "and thou wilt find thy master angry because thou hast tarried so long, and there was none to work for him, so that his corn has to remain standing in the field. Then he will send thee to bring in his sheaves, and I'll help thee. Load the wagon well, but don't take quite all the sheaves from the field. Leave one little sheaf behind; more than that thou needst not leave, but that thou must leave. Then beg thy master to let thee have this little sheaf by way of wages. Take no money from him, but that one little sheaf only. Then, when thy master has given thee this sheaf, burn it, and a fair lady will leap out of it; take her to wife!"

The labourer obeyed, and went and worked for his master as the Serpent had told him. He went out into the field to bring home his master's corn, and marvellously he managed it. He did all the carrying himself, and loaded the wagon so heavily that it creaked beneath its burden. Then when he had brought home all his

master's corn, he begged that he might have the remaining little sheaf for himself. He refused to be rewarded for his smart labour, he would take no money; he wanted nothing for himself, he said, but the little sheaf he had left in the field. So his master let him have the sheaf. Then he went out by himself into the field, burnt the sheaf, just as the Serpent had told him, and immediately a lovely lady leapt out of it. The labourer forthwith took and married her; and now he began to look out for a place to build him a hut upon. His master gave him a place where he might build his hut, and his wife helped him so much with the building of it that it seemed to him as if he himself never laid a hand to it. His hut grew up as quick as thought, and it contained everything that they wanted. The man could not understand it; he could only walk about and wonder at it. Wherever he looked there was everything quite spick and span and ready for use: none in the whole village had a better house than he.

And so he might have lived in all peace and prosperity to the end of his days had not his desires outstripped his deserts. He had three fields of standing corn, and when he came home one day his labourers said to him, "Thy corn is not gathered in yet, though it is standing all ripe on its stalks." Now the season was getting on, and for all the care and labour of his wife, the corn was still standing in the field. "Why, what's the meaning of this?" thought he. Then in his anger he cried, "I see how it is. Once a serpent, always a serpent!" He was quite beside himself all the way home, and was very wrath with his wife because of the corn.

When he got home he went straight to his chamber to lie down on his pillow. There was no sign of his wife, but a huge serpent was just coiling itself round and round and settling down in the middle of the pillow. Then he called to mind how, once, his wife had said to him, "Beware, for Heaven's sake, of ever calling me a serpent. I will not suffer thee to call me by that name, and if thou dost thou shalt lose thy wife."

He called this to mind now, but it was already too late; what he had said could not be unsaid. Then he reflected what a good wife he had had, and how she herself had sought him out, and how she had waited upon him continually and done him boundless good, and yet he had not been able to refrain his tongue, so that now, maybe, he would be without a wife for the rest of his days. His heart grew heavy within him as he thought of all this, and he wept bitterly at the harm he had done to himself.

Then the Serpent said to him, "Weep no more. What is to be, must be. Is it thy standing corn thou art grieved about? Go up to thy barn, and there thou wilt find all thy corn lying, to the very last little grain. Have I not brought it all home and threshed it for thee, and set everything in order? And now I must depart to the place where thou didst first find me." Then she crept off, and the man followed her, weeping and mourning all the

time as for one already dead. When they reached the forest she stopped and coiled herself round and round beneath a hazel-nut bush.

Then she said to the man, "Now kiss me once, but see to it that I do not bite thee!"--Then he kissed her once, and she wound herself round a branch of a tree and asked him, "What dost thou feel within thee?"--He answered, "At the moment when I kissed thee it seemed to me as if I knew everything that was going on in the world!"--Then she said to him again, "Kiss me a second time!"--"And what dost thou feel now?" she asked when he had kissed her again.--"Now," said he, "I understand all languages which are spoken among men."--Then she said to him, "And now kiss me a third time, but this will be for the last time."

Then he kissed the Serpent for the last time, and she said to him, "What dost thou feel now?"--"Now," said he, "I know all that is going on under the earth."--"Go now," said she, "to the Tsar, and he will give thee his daughter for the knowledge thou hast. But pray to God for poor me, for now I must be and remain a serpent for ever." And with that the Serpent uncoiled herself and disappeared among the bushes, but the man went away and wedded the Tsar's daughter.

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