

Prince Lindworm

There was once a King and his lovely Queen, who lived in blissful happiness, but for one thing. They had no children. One day the Queen, in great sorrow consulted an old crone who lived in the forest and was told the remedy for her sterility. She should place a small goblet upside down in her garden, the crone said, and the next morning she would find two roses, one white and one red growing underneath it on a single stalk. If she ate the red rose she would have a boy; if the white rose, a girl. In any case she had to choose one or the other. If she ate both a catastrophe would result.

The queen was ecstatic and did as the old woman said, but after eating the white rose, she got greedy, forgot her promise, and ate the second rose also. When it came time for the birth, twins were born, but the first-born was a hideous Lindworm or serpent. The queen was terribly frightened when she saw him, but he snaked out of sight with one quick lithe movement, so that no-one else saw him. Besides right after the Lindworm came a fine son who was so wonderful and handsome and made everyone so happy that the Queen lived her life as though the Lindworm had never been.

Many blissful years later, the handsome Prince set off in a royal coach in search of adventure and a wife. No sooner had he reached the cross-roads however than an enormous Lindworm, its fangs more deadly than lightning reared before him and hissed "A bride for me before a bride for you!" The Prince fled back to the castle and the King was about to send out an army of men to fight the beast, when the Queen thought it time to confess that the Lindworm had only claimed what was rightfully his--he was the elder child and had a right to marry first.

Thereupon began a " nine days' wonder and a ten-day debate" after which the King concluded that if the Prince was ever to marry, they'd better find a bride for Prince Lindworm first. This was easier said than done, but the king sent to the most distant countries he could think of in search of a Princess. The first Princess arrived and unknowingly got involved in the wedding festivities until it was too late to back out, and when morning came there was nothing left of her and the Lindworm had the look of one sleeping off a good meal. "After a short but respectful period" the Prince rode out again, only to be confronted once again by the Lindworm, more impatient than ever! Again a Princess was found and she too was not permitted to see her bridegroom till it was too late. After the wedding night, she too was only a bulge in the Lindworm's belly. Again the Prince rode out and again at the crossroads was stopped by his brother Lindworm. By this time the King was beside himself. No more princesses could be found and the King in desperation, decided to ask one of his lowly shepherds who lived in a tumbledown cottage for his daughter as the Lindworm's next wife. The shepherd refused but the King would not take no for an answer so the lovely girl was told of her fate.

The shepherd's daughter was beside herself with grief. She wept and ran through the woods bleeding and desolate until she came to an old crone--seemingly the same one who had advised the Queen in her sorrow 20 years earlier--and to this old woman she poured out her plight. "Dry your eyes, my child--and do exactly as I tell you" said the crone. "When the wedding is over, you must ask to be attired in 10 silken shifts and when the Lindworm asks you to take off your shift, you must bid him shed a skin. When this happens nine times, he will be nothing but a writhing mass of flesh and you must then whip him soundly with whips dipped in lye. When this is done, bathe him in sweet milk, and lastly you must take him in your arms and hold him close, if only for one brief moment." Ugh cried the shepherd's daughter. I can never do that!. It is that or be eaten, chided the crone and she disappeared.

So when the wedding was over and the horror of the Lindworm was there before her in the bedchamber--half man, half snake, the repulsive creature turned to her and said "fair maiden, shed a shift". Prince Lindworm, she replied, "cast a skin!" "No one has dared tell me to do that before," he hissed angrily and for a moment she thought he would swallow her down, but instead he began to moan and groan and writhe until a long strong snakeskin lay on the floor. She drew off her first shift and spread it on top of the skin. And so it went, despite his protests and his groans and his writhing and slobbering until in the end he was a raw, thick, slimy mass, "now rearing, now rolling, now slithering all over the floor." Then the shepherd's daughter took the whips, dipped them in lye as she was told and whipped him with all her might and main.

When she was exhausted, she washed him in fresh milk and then took him grovelling in her arms and held him close for one brief moment before she fell asleep.

Next morning the King and his courtiers came in sorrow to the wedding chamber--afraid to enter, at length the King opened the door. There was the lovely shepherd's daughter, all dewy with the dawn. And in her arms was no Lindworm, "but a quicksilver Prince as Handsome as the grass is green." The Palace echoed with happiness at this discovery and after the rejoicing came a wedding celebration such as had never been seen before or since. Thereafter, the Prince and his new Princess reigned happily ever after.

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