# The Serpent-Tsarevich and His Two Wives

There was once a Tsaritsa who had no child, and greatly desired one, so the soothsayers said to her, “Bid them catch thee a pike, bid them boil its head and nothing but its head, eat it, and thou shalt see what will happen.” So she did so. She ate the pike’s head and went about as usual for a whole year, and when the year was out she gave birth to a son who was a serpent.And no sooner was he born than he looked about him, and said, “Mammy and daddy! Bid them make me a stone hut, and let there be a little bed there, and a little stove and a fire to warm me, and let me be married in a fortnight!”––So they did as he desired. They shut him up in a stone hut, with a little bed and a little stove and fire to warm him, and in a fortnight he grew quite big, indeed he grew too big for his little bed. “And now,” said he, “I want to be married!” So they brought to him all the fair young damsels of the land that he might choose one to be his own true bride. Exceeding fair were all the damsels they brought him, and yet he would choose none of them. Now there was an old woman there, who had twelve daughters, and eleven of these daughters they brought to the Serpent-Tsarevich, but not the twelfth. “She is too young!” said they.––Then the youngest daughter said, “Ye fools, not to take me too! Why, if I were brought to the Serpent-Tsarevich, he would make me his bride at once.”Now this came to the Tsar’s ears, and he commanded them to bring her to him straightway. And the Tsar said to her, “Wilt thou be my son’s bride or not?”––And she said, “I will; but before I go to thy son, give me at once a score of chemises, and a score of linen kirtles, and a score of woollen kirtles, and twenty pairs of shoes––twenty of each, I say.”––So the Tsar gave them to her, and she put on the twenty chemises, the twenty linen kirtles, the twenty woollen kirtles, and the twenty pairs of shoes, one after the other, and went to see the Serpent-Tsarevich. When she came to the threshold of his hut, she stopped and said, “Hail, O Serpent-Tsarevich!”––“Hail, maiden!” cried he. “Wilt thou be my bride?”––“I will!”––“Then take off one of thy skins!” cried he.––“Yes,” she said, “but thou must do the same.”––So he cast off one of his skins, and she cast off one of her twenty suits of clothes. Then he cried out again, “Cast off another of thy skins, maiden.”––“Yes,” she replied, “but thou must cast off one too!”––So he did so. Nineteen times did he cast off one of his serpent’s skins, and nineteen times did she cast off one of her suits of clothes, till at last she had only her every-day suit left, and he had only his human skin left. Then he threw off his last skin also, and it flew about in the air like a gossamer, whereupon she seized hold of it and threw it into the fire that was burning on the hearth till it was all consumed, and he stood before her no longer a serpent, but a simple Tsarevich. Then they married and lived happily together, but the husband never would go to visit his old father the Tsar, nor would he allow his bride to go near the palace.The old Tsar sent for him again and again, but his son would never go. At last the wife was ashamed, and said to her husband one day, “Dear heart! let me go to thy father! I will only go for my own pastime, lest he get angry. Why should I not go?” Then he let her go, and she went to the court of the old Tsar, and took her pastime there. She amused herself finely, and ate and drank her fill of all good things. Now her husband had laid this command upon her, “Go and divert thyself if thou wilt, but if thou tell my father and my mother what has happened to me, and how I have lost my twenty serpent skins, thou shalt never see me more.” For they did not know that he was now no longer a serpent, but a simple Tsarevich. She vowed she would never tell; but for all her promises, she nevertheless told them at last how her husband had lost his twenty serpent skins. Then she enjoyed herself to her heart’s content, but when she returned home she found no trace of her husband––he had departed to another kingdom in the uttermost parts of the world.Then the poor bride sat her down and wept and wept, and when she had no more tears to weep, she went forth into the wide world to seek her husband. She went on till she came to a lonely little house, and she went and begged a night’s lodging from the old woman who dwelt there, who was the Mother of the Winds. But the Mother of the Winds would not let her in. “God preserve thee, child!” said she. “My son is already winging his way hither. In another moment thou wilt hear the rustling of his wings, in another moment he will slay thee, and scatter thy bones to the four winds.” But the bride besought the old woman till she had her desire, and the old woman hid her behind a huge chest. A moment afterward the son of the Mother of the Winds came flying up, and he smelt out the bride, and said, “What’s this, mother? There is an evil smell of Cossack bones about the house!”––“No, it is not that,” said his mother, “but a young woman has taken shelter here, who says that she is going in search of her husband.”––“Then, mother, give her the little silver apple, and let her go, for her husband is in another kingdom.” So they sent her away with the little silver apple.She went on and on till night descended upon her, and she came to the lonely abode of another old woman, and begged a night’s lodging of her also. But the old woman would not let her in. “My son will be here presently,” said she, “and he will slay thee.”––“Nay, but, granny,” said the bride, “I’ve already stayed the night with such as thou, for I have lodged at the house of the Mother of the Winds.”––Then the old woman took her in, and hid her, for she was the Mother of the Moon. And immediately afterward the Moon came flying up. “What is this, little mother?” cried he. “I smell an evil smell of Cossack bones!”––But she said to him, “Nay, my dear little son, but a young woman has come hither who is obliged to search for her husband because she told his father and mother the truth.” Then the Moon said, “’Twould be as well to let her go on farther. Give her the little golden apple, and let her be off as quickly as possible, for her husband is about to marry another wife.” So she passed the night there, and in the morning they sent her away with the little golden apple.She went on and on. Night again descended upon her, and she came to the house of the Mother of the Sun, and begged her for a night’s lodging. But the old woman said to her, “I cannot let thee in. My son is flying about the world, but he will fly hither presently, and if he find thee here he will slay thee!”––Then the bride said, “Nay, but, granny dear, I have already lodged with the like of thee. I have lodged with the Mother of the Winds, and the Mother of the Moon, and they each gave me a little apple.” Then the Mother of the Sun also let her in. Immediately afterward her son, the Sun, came flying up, and he said, “Why, what is this, little mother? I smell an evil smell of Cossack bones!”––But his mother answered, “A young woman came hither who begged for a night’s lodging.” She did not tell her son the whole truth, that the bride was in search of her husband, but he knew it already, and said, “Her husband is about to marry another wife. Let her go to the land where now he is, and give her the diamond apple, which is the best and most precious apple in the whole world, and tell her to hasten on to the house where her husband abides. They won’t let her in there, but she must disguise herself as an old woman, and sit down outside in the courtyard, and spread out a cloth and lay upon it her little silver apple, and all the people will come flocking around to see the old woman who is selling apples of silver.” So the bride did as the Sun bade her, and went to that distant empire, and the Empress of that empire, whom her husband had married, came to see what she was selling, and said to her, “What dost thou want for thy silver apple?” And she answered, “No money do I want for it. Oh, sovereign lady, all that I require in exchange therefor is that I may pass the night near my husband.”––Then the Empress took the apple, and allowed her to come into the bedchamber of the Tsarevich to pass the night there; but first of all she gave the Tsarevich a sleeping draught so that he knew nothing, and could speak not a word to her, nor could he even recognize what manner of person his true wife was. Then only did the Empress let her come into the room where her husband lay. And she watched over him, she watched over him the live-long night, and with the dawn she departed.The next morning he awoke out of his drugged sleep, and said to himself, “Why, what is this? It is just as if my first wife has been weeping over me here, and wetted me with her tears!” But he told nobody what he thought, nor did he say a word about it to his second wife. “Wait a bit!” thought he, “to-morrow night I’ll not go to sleep. I’ll watch and watch till I watch the thing out.”The next day the faithful wife spread out her little cloth again, and laid upon it her golden apple. The Empress again came that way, went up to her, and said, “Sell me that apple of thine, and I’ll give thee for it as many pence as thou canst hold in thy lap!”––But she replied, “Nay, my sovereign lady! money for it I will not take, but let me pass one more night in my own husband’s room!”––And the Empress took the apple, and let her go there. But first the Empress caressed and kissed her husband into a good humour, and then she gave him another sleeping draught. And the faithful wife came again, and watched and wept over him and wetted him with her tears, and with the dawn she departed.And now she had only one apple left, but that was the diamond apple, the most precious apple in the world. And she said to the Empress, “Let me watch by him for this apple but one night more, and I’ll never ask again!” And she let her. Now this night also her husband was asleep. And his first wife came and immediately began to kiss him on the head, but he said nothing. Then she kissed him again, and at last he awoke and started up, and said, “Who’s that?”––“It is I, thy first wife.”––“How hast thou found thy way hither?”––“Oh, I have been here and there and everywhere. I have lodged with the Mother of the Winds, and the Mother of the Moon, and the Mother of the Sun, and they gave me three apples, and I gave these apples to thy Empress-wife, and she let me watch over thee, and this is the third night that I have watched by thy side.”Then he came to his right mind, and cried aloud that they should bring in lights, and he saw that his faithful wife was quite an old woman. Then he bethought him, and said, “Was ever the like of this known? My first and faithful wife goes a-seeking her husband throughout the wide world, while my accursed second wife, Empress though she be, sells her husband for three apples!”Then he bade them give his faithful wife rich garments as much as she would, and she stripped off her disguise, and washed her face and grew young again. But the faithless wife was tied to the tails of four wild horses, and they tore her to pieces in the endless steppe.

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