

Eglė the Queen of Serpents – Lithuanian tale

Once there lived a family that had three daughters and nine sons. The youngest of the sisters, Eglė, was the most beautiful. One day Eglė and her sisters went to the lake for an evening swim. They left their clothes on the shore and ran into the water. After having swum the girls left the water. Eglė discovered a grass-snake in her clothes. The grass-snake started speaking in a human voice. He asked her to marry him - then he would give her clothes back. Eglė just wanted the snake to leave her clothes and promised to become his wife. The snake slithered out of her dress and disappeared. Seven days went by, and Eglė forgot about her promise.

One morning she heard a rumbling noise and saw a carriage pulled by hissing grass-snakes. Frightened, Eglė told her parents all that had happened that night at the lake. Eglė's parents dressed a white goose as the bride, and lifted her into the carriage. The grass-snakes departed. Suddenly they heard a cuckoo saying that this was not the bride they should have had. Furious, the snakes returned thundering to Eglė's house. They returned to claim the real bride. Old parents gave a sheep dressed all in white. The cuckoo warned the snakes once more. Again they returned rumbling even more loudly. This time Eglė had to keep her promise.

The grass-snakes brought Eglė to the sea shore where she found a handsome young man waiting for her. He revealed that he was the same serpent she had seen at the lake shore and promised to marry. He was also the king of the snakes - his name was Zhilvinas. He took Eglė to his underwater castle. There she found everything her heart desired, and Eglė spent her days happily with her loving husband. They had four children - Azhuolas (Oak), Berzhas (Birch), Uosis (Ash) and a little daughter Drebulė (Aspen). Days went by, and Eglė missed her family.

Zhilvinas promised her a trip home if she would wear out iron shoes he had given for her. Eglė turned to an old sea witch for advice. She told Eglė to have a smith put these shoes in his forge - the shoes would wear out soon. She then got another challenge. She had to spin a tuff of silk. Eglė turned to the sea witch once again. Zhilvinas had then a third request for Eglė. He asked Eglė to bake some bread to bring home. If she completed this task, then she would be free to go. He hid every dish in the kitchen except an old sieve. The old witch helped Eglė once more.

All the tasks were done and Eglė was allowed to go to see her family. Zhilvinas told Eglė and the children not to stay longer than 9 days and returning to the seashore to call him by name and say: if you are alive, come as milk foam, if you are dead, come as blood foam.

Eglė left with her sons and the daughter. Her kinfolk had a great feast to celebrate her visit. Eglė's brothers had no desire to lose Eglė again. At night they took the oldest son Azhuolas with them to pasture the horses and

started asking him how they were to call their father when they wanted to return home. But Azhuolas did not betray his father. Neither did Berzhas and Uosis. On the fourth day, the brothers took little Drebule to the pasture. Afraid they would hurt her, she cried as she told them all about the song. The brothers at once set forth to the sea and called Zhilvinas. The waves had a milk foam and Zilvinas was coming. They attacked Zhilvinas with their scythes. After nine days Egle set out to journey back home. On the seashore she sang the song she was told to sing by her husband. She looked for the milk foam on the sea. But instead, what she saw was a bright crimson blood foam.

Deep pain shook Egle's heart - she cast a spell on her children and they all turned into great Lithuanian trees. The sons became trees that are valued even today for their great strength. The little daughter turned to a frail aspen tree that shakes in the mildest wind. Egle herself turned to a fir tree and stayed close to the sea shore to mourn for her husband forever.