

EGLE THE QUEEN OF SERPENTS

A LITHUANIAN TALE



Once upon a time, there lived an old man and his wife. Together, they had nine sons and three daughters. The youngest girl was named Eglė. On a warm summer evening, all three girls decided to go swimming. After bathing with her two sisters, Eglė discovered a serpent in the sleeve of her blouse. The eldest girl grabbed Eglė's blouse, threw it down, and jumped on it, but the serpent did not leave. Turning to the youngest, Eglė, the serpent spoke to her in a man's voice, saying, "Eglė, promise to become my wife, and I will gladly come out." In order to get him to leave her clothes, Eglė agreed to be his wife.

Seven days later, thousands of serpents came for Eglė, but her relatives dressed a goose in white and gave her out as the bride. A cuckoo in the forest warned the serpents of the deceit. All in anger they returned to Eglė's parents and claimed for the real bride. This time Eglė's father gave out a white sheep. The cuckoo warned the serpents again. Finally the parents were made to give their daughter out, and the serpents took Eglė with them to their master at the bottom of the sea. Instead of seeing a serpent, Eglė met her bridegroom Zhilvinas, a handsome man and the Serpent Prince. They married and bore four children: three sons and a daughter, living happily.

Time passed, Eglė became more and more homesick. She wished to visit her parents and relatives, but her husband would not allow her. In order to be allowed the visit, Eglė would be required to fulfill three impossible tasks: to spin a never-ending tuft of silk, wear down a pair of iron shoes, and bake a pie with no utensils. Upon the advice from a sorceress, Eglė was able to complete these tasks. She and her children left Zhilvinas to visit her home promising to come back after nine days to the seashore and call him by his name.

After meeting with Eglė and her children, her family wished to keep her rather than let her return to the sea. They plotted to kill Zhilvinas. Eglė's brothers asked her sons to reveal the secret calling of Zhilvinas, but they would not. Finally, Eglė's daughter disclosed it:

"Zhilvinas, dear Zhilvinas,
If alive – come as milk foam,
If dead - come as blood foam."

Eglė's brothers then called Zhilvinas out from the sea, and killed him with scythes. They kept the secret of their deed from Eglė. When nine days passed, Eglė took her children to the seashore, but there was no Zhilvinas to meet them. Worried, Eglė called her husband again, but only foams of blood returned from the sea and told her about the brothers' treachery and the daughter's betrayal.

Deep pain shook Eglė's heart - she cast a spell on her children and they all turned into great Lithuanian trees. The sons turned into an oak, an ash and a birch, the little daughter turned to a frail aspen tree that shakes in the mildest wind. Eglė herself turned to a fir tree and stayed close to the sea shore to mourn for her husband forever."

*Kaunas College Kedainiai Jonusas Radvila Faculty/ Lithuania
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I. Read the tale and answer the questions:

1. What did Eglė find in her clothes after swimming in the sea?
2. What did the serpent want?
3. Did Eglė give a positive answer to the serpent's request?
4. What happened seven days later?
5. How did Eglė's parents try to cheat the serpents? Did they succeed?
6. What was Zhilvinas?
7. Where did he take Eglė?
8. How did she live with her husband?
9. Why did Eglė decide to go back to her parent's home?
10. What did Eglė have to do to be allowed to visit her parents?
11. Who helped her to fulfill the three tasks?
12. What did Eglė and the children promise Zhilvinas?
13. Why did Eglė's brothers decide to kill Zhilvinas?
14. How did they manage to find him?
15. What did Eglė do when she found out Zhilvinas was dead?

II. Read the tale again and make live sculptures.

1. Happy sisters in the sea.
2. Frightened sisters at seeing a serpent in Eglė's clothes.
3. The promise to be the serpent's wife.
4. Serpents come for Eglė.
5. The tricked serpents.
6. Eglė, the happy queen of serpents.
7. Longing for the motherland.
8. Eglė's word to come back.
9. Happy home again.
10. Brothers' betrayal.
11. Eglė and her children trying to come home.
12. Eglė's grief.

III. Mime the above given situations.

IV. Think of the words that could be said in these situations. Act them out.

V. Think if you have similar tales in your country. Discuss their similarities and differences from the point of view of characters, location, traditions, topics touched...