



Bearskin

Translated from the Grimm's tale *Bärenhäuter* published in *Kinder-und Hausmärchen. Grosse Ausgabe. Band 2 (1857)*. Translation by Helena Weinberg with the assistance of Jo Richards.

Once upon a time there was a young fellow who was a brave soldier and never far from the front line. Everything went well for him in times of war but when one day peace was made, the soldier was discharged of his duties and left to go his own way. The soldier had no parents and no home, so he turned to his brothers for help and support. But his brothers were lacking compassion and said to him: 'Why should we help you? You are of no use to us. See how you can cope on your own'. So the soldier took his rifle, which was his only possession, and left.

Walking along, he passed a heath with nothing to be seen save a ring of trees. The sad soldier sat down underneath the trees and bemoaned his fate. 'I have no money', thought he, 'my skills are only useful in times of war but in this time of peace I am of no use to anybody and will surely starve.' All of a sudden he heard a hissing and roaring noise. When he turned around he faced a man he had never seen before. The stranger was dressed in a green frock-coat and would make an elegant impression if it was not for his ugly cloven hooves. 'I know very well what you need', said the man, 'You shall have plenty of money and possessions but as I don't want to waste my money I need to know whether you have enough courage, first. 'Fear does not suit a soldier', replied the young fellow, 'You can test my courage, if you want'. 'Fair enough', said the man, 'Look around'. The soldier turned around and saw a growling bear approaching. 'Ohoo', called out the soldier, 'I will put you off your growling'. Then he aimed and shot the bear dead.

'You have proven your courage', said the stranger, 'but I will set another task you have to carry out.'

'As long as my soul is not at stake' responded the soldier for he knew very well who the stranger was.

'See for yourself', said the Devil in green and continued: 'In the next seven years you shall not wash yourself, nor brush your hair or beard, nor cut your nails, nor pray the Lord's Prayer. I will give you a coat which you have to wear during this time. If you die within the seven years, you are mine but if you survive I will set you free and

you will have enough money for the rest of your days. The soldier considered his current misery and having already faced death so many times in his life he agreed to the risky deal. So the devil took off his green coat and gave it to the soldier saying: 'As long as you wear it you will always find money in your pockets'. After that he skinned the bear and said: 'This shall be your coat and cover for the night; you shall lie in no other bed. And from now on you shall be called Bearskin' whereupon the devil vanished.

The soldier put on the coat, checked his pockets and found everything to his satisfaction. Then he put on the bearskin and went out into the world in good spirits, not refraining from anything which would do him good and which could not harm the money. In the first year he got on more or less unscathed but in the second year he already resembled a monster. Most of his face was covered by hair; his beard bore a resemblance to a piece of felt cloth; he had claws instead of nails and his face was so dirty that if you had sowed cress on it, it would have surely sprouted. Anyone who saw him would run away but as he gave money to the poor wherever he went, so that they would pray for him, and as he paid his debts properly, people still offered him shelter. In the fourth year he arrived at an inn but the landlord refused to let him even into the barn as he feared his horses would get a fright. But when Bearskin produced some ducats from his pockets the landlord let himself be persuaded and offered him a room in the building at the back, but Bearskin had to promise not to show up as the man feared for the good reputation of his inn.

In the evening, when Bearskin sat alone in his room wishing with all his heart that the seven years would be finally over, he heard someone crying bitterly in the room next door. Bearskin had a kind heart so he opened the door and found a man sobbing his heart out. He approached the man, but the latter jumped to his feet prepared to run away. Only when he heard Bearskin speaking in a human voice soothingly he decided to stay and with some encouragement to tell him the reason for his grief: 'My wealth is gone.' began the man, 'My daughters and I are bound to live in poverty; I am so poor that I cannot pay my debts to the landlord and will therefore be sent to prison'.

'If that's all that worries you', replied bearskin, 'I've got enough money'. And he sent for the landlord, paid the man's debt and even slipped some gold into the man's pocket. Having been released from his heavy burden he was eager to express his gratitude to Bearskin, so he said: 'Come with me. My daughters are of a beauty beyond your imagination. You may choose one of them as your future wife. She will not refuse you, when she learns what you have done for me. Obviously you look a bit strange but she will see to that. The man's offer pleased bearskin greatly, so he went with him. When the oldest daughter saw Bearskin she was so horrified at the sight of him that she shrieked with fright and ran away. The second daughter did not run away but after examining him from head to toe said: 'How could I marry someone who does not look human anymore? I'd rather marry the shaved bear who posed as a human the other day. At least he had the fur coat of a hussar and white gloves.' But the youngest said: 'My beloved father, this must be a good man because he helped you in your hour of need; if you have promised him a bride, so be it. What a shame that Bearskin's face was covered in hair and dirt, otherwise you would have seen that his heart jumped for joy at her words. He took a ring from his finger, broke

it in two and gave one half to the maiden, the other half he kept for himself. And he wrote his name in her part of the ring and her name in his part of the ring and bade her farewell saying: 'I have to travel the world for another three years. You are free should I not return after this time for I will be dead. But pray to God that he keeps me alive.'

The poor bride dressed in black and every time she thought about her groom her eyes welled up with tears. From her sisters, though, she received nothing but scorn and ridicule. 'Be careful!' said the oldest, 'If you hold out your hand to him, he will strike it with his paw'.

'You'd better watch out!', said the second, 'Bears love sweet things and if he likes you he will eat you'.

'You'd better do what he wants', mocked the oldest, 'or he will growl at you' and the second continued: 'But the wedding will be jolly; bears are fine dancers'.

The bride remained silent and did not let herself be put off by it. Meanwhile Bearskin wandered the world from one place to another, did good deeds wherever he could and gave plenty of money to the poor so that they would pray for him. When at last, the final day of the seven years dawned he went out on the heath and sat down under the ring of trees. Shortly afterwards the wind roared and the devil appeared – a morose expression on his face at the sight of Bearskin. He threw the soldier's old coat to him and demanded the green one. 'There is no rush' replied Bearskin, 'First you will clean me'. Whether he liked it or not, the devil had to bring some water, clean Bearskin, brush his hair and cut his nails. After that he looked like a brave warrior again and was handsomer than ever before.

After the devil had left Bearskin was relieved. He went into town, put on elegant clothes, got into a carriage drawn by four greys and went to his bride's house. Nobody recognized him; his father-in-law thought he was a high ranking officer and led him into the room where his daughters were sitting. The soldier had to sit down between the two older ones. They filled his glass of wine, offered him the tastiest morsels and thought they had never seen a handsomer man in the world before. But the bride sat opposite him, dressed in black, and did not meet his eye, nor did she utter a word. When he finally asked the father if he could take one of the daughters as his future wife, the two oldest jumped to their feet and hurried into their room intending to get dressed in splendid clothes, for each of them thought she was the chosen one.

As soon as the stranger found himself alone with his bride, he took out his half of the ring, dropped it into a goblet with wine and passed it across the table towards her. She took the goblet and after having drunk from it she found the ring at its bottom and her heart leapt with joy. So she revealed her part of the ring which she was wearing on a cord around her neck, held it up to the other part and both fitted perfectly. Finally the stranger spoke: 'I am your betrothed groom whom you have met as Bearskin but by the grace of God I regained my human form and am now purified'. He stepped forward, embraced her and gave her a kiss. Just in that moment, the two older sisters came in, all spruced up, and when they saw that the handsome man was given to their younger sister and learned that the man was

Bearskin, they stormed off in anger; one of them drowned herself in a well, the other one hanged herself on a tree.

In the evening, someone knocked at the door, the groom opened it and there was the devil in green frock. He said: 'You see, it was not such a bad bargain for me either, as now I have two souls for your single one'.