

The Brown Bear of Norway

There was once a king in Ireland, and he had three daughters, and very nice princesses they were. And one day, when they and their father were walking on the lawn, the king began to joke with them, and to ask them whom they would like to be married to. 'I'll have the king of Ulster for a husband,' says one; 'and I'll have the king of Munster,' says another; 'and,' says the youngest, 'I'll have no husband but the Brown Bear of Norway.' For a nurse of hers used to be telling her of an enchanted prince that she called by that name, and she fell in love with him, and his name was the first name on her tongue, for the very night before she was dreaming of him. Well, one laughed, and another laughed, and they joked with the princess all the rest of the evening. But that very night she woke up out of her sleep in a great hall that was lighted up with a thousand lamps; the richest carpets were on the floor, and the walls were covered with cloth of gold and silver, and the place was full of grand company, and the very beautiful prince she saw in her dreams was there, and it wasn't a moment till he was on one knee before her, and telling her how much he loved her, and asking her wouldn't she be his queen. Well, she hadn't the heart to refuse him, and married they were the same evening.

'Now, my darling,' says he, when they were left by themselves, 'you must know that I am under enchantment. A sorceress, that had a beautiful daughter, wished me for her son-in-law; but the mother got power over me, and when I refused to wed her daughter she made me take the form of a bear by day, and I was to continue so till a lady would marry me of her own free will, and endure five years of great trials after.'

Well, when the princess woke in the morning, she missed her husband from her side, and spent the day very sadly. But as soon as the lamps were lighted in the grand hall, where she was sitting on a sofa covered with silk, the folding doors flew open, and he was sitting by her side the next minute. So they spent another happy evening, but he warned her that whenever she began to tire of him, or ceased to have faith in him, they would be parted for ever, and he'd be obliged to marry the witch's daughter.

She got used to find him absent by day, and they spent a happy twelvemonth together, and at last a beautiful little boy was born; and happy as she was before, she was twice as happy now, for she had her child to keep her company in the day when she couldn't see her husband.

At last, one evening, when herself, and himself, and her child were sitting with a window open because it was a sultry night, in flew an eagle, took the infant's sash in his beak, and flew up in the air with him. She screamed, and was going to throw herself out the window after him, but the prince caught her, and looked at her very seriously. She bethought of what he said soon after their marriage, and she stopped the cries and complaints that were on her tongue. She spent her days very lonely for another twelvemonth, when a beautiful little girl was sent to her. Then she thought to herself she'd have a sharp eye about her this time; so she never would allow a window to be more than a few inches open.

But all her care was in vain. Another evening, when they were all so happy, and the prince dandling the baby, a beautiful greyhound stood before them, took the child out of the father's hand, and was out of the door before you could wink. This time she shouted and ran out of the room, but there were some of the servants in the next room, and all declared that neither child nor dog passed out. She felt, somehow, as if it was her husband's fault, but still she kept command over herself, and didn't once reproach him.

When the third child was born she would hardly allow a window or a door to be left open for a moment; but she wasn't the nearer to keep the child to herself. They were sitting one evening by the fire, when a lady appeared standing by them. The princess opened her eyes in a great fright and stared at her, and while she was doing so, the lady wrapped a shawl round the baby that was sitting in its

father's lap, and either sank through the ground with it or went up through the wide chimney. This time the mother kept her bed for a month.

'My dear,' said she to her husband, when she was beginning to recover, 'I think I'd feel better if I was to see my father and mother and sisters once more. If you give me leave to go home for a few days I'd be glad.' 'Very well,' said he, 'I will do that, and whenever you feel inclined to return, only mention your wish when you lie down at night.' The next morning when she awoke she found herself in her own old chamber in her father's palace. She rang the bell, and in a short time she had her mother and father and married sisters about her, and they laughed till they cried for joy at finding her safe back again.

In time she told them all that had happened to her, and they didn't know what to advise her to do. She was as fond of her husband as ever, and said she was sure that he couldn't help letting the children go; but still she was afraid beyond the world to have another child torn from her. Well, the mother and sisters consulted a wise woman that used to bring eggs to the castle, for they had great faith in her wisdom. She said the only plan was to secure the bear's skin that the prince was obliged to put on every morning, and get it burned, and then he couldn't help being a man night and day, and the enchantment would be at an end.

So they all persuaded her to do that, and she promised she would; and after eight days she felt so great a longing to see her husband again that she made the wish the same night, and when she woke three hours after, she was in her husband's palace, and he himself was watching over her. There was great joy on both sides, and they were happy for many days.

Now she began to think how she never minded her husband leaving her in the morning, and how she never found him neglecting to give her a sweet drink out of a gold cup just as she was going to bed.

One night she contrived not to drink any of it, though she pretended to do so; and she was wakeful enough in the morning, and saw her husband passing out through a panel in the wainscot, though she kept her eyelids nearly closed. The next night she got a few drops of the sleepy posset that she saved the evening before put into her husband's night drink, and that made him sleep sound enough. She got up after midnight, passed through the panel, and found a Beautiful brown bear's hide hanging in the corner. Then she stole back, and went down to the parlour fire, and put the hide into the middle of it till it was all fine ashes. She then lay down by her husband, gave him a kiss on the cheek, and fell asleep.

If she was to live a hundred years she'd never forget how she wakened next morning, and found her husband looking down on her with misery and anger in his face. 'Unhappy woman,' said he, 'you have separated us for ever! Why hadn't you patience for five years? I am now obliged, whether I like or no, to go a three days' journey to the witch's castle, and marry her daughter. The skin that was my guard you have burned it, and the egg-wife that gave you the counsel was the witch herself. I won't reproach you: your punishment will be severe without it. Farewell for ever!'

He kissed her for the last time, and was off the next minute, walking as fast as he could. She shouted after him, and then seeing there was no use, she dressed herself and pursued him. He never stopped, nor stayed, nor looked back, and still she kept him in sight; and when he was on the hill she was in the hollow, and when he was in the hollow she was on the hill. Her life was almost leaving her, when, just as the sun was setting, he turned up a lane, and went into a little house. She crawled up after him, and when she got inside there was a beautiful little boy on his knees, and he kissing and hugging him. 'Here, my poor darling,' says he, 'is your eldest child, and there,' says he, pointing to a woman that was looking on with a smile on her face, 'is the eagle that carried him away.' She forgot all her sorrows in a moment, hugging her child, and laughing and crying over him. The woman washed their feet, and rubbed them with an ointment that took all the soreness out of their bones, and made them as fresh as a daisy. Next morning, just before sunrise, he was up, and prepared to be off, 'Here,' said he to her, 'is a

thing which may be of use to you. It's a scissors, and whatever stuff you cut with it will be turned into silk. The moment the sun rises, I'll lose all memory of yourself and the children, but I'll get it at sunset again. Farewell!' But he wasn't far gone till she was in sight of him again, leaving her boy behind. It was the same to-day as yesterday: their shadows went before them in the morning and followed them in the evening. He never stopped, and she never stopped, and as the sun was setting he turned up another lane, and there they found their little daughter. It was all joy and comfort again till morning, and then the third day's journey commenced.

But before he started he gave her a comb, and told her that whenever she used it, pearls and diamonds would fall from her hair. Still he had his memory from sunset to sunrise; but from sunrise to sunset he travelled on under the charm, and never threw his eye behind. This night they came to where the youngest baby was, and the next morning, just before sunrise, the prince spoke to her for the last time. 'Here, my poor wife,' said he, 'is a little hand-reel, with gold thread that has no end, and the half of our marriage ring. If you ever get to my house, and put your half-ring to mine, I shall recollect you. There is a wood yonder, and the moment I enter it I shall forget everything that ever happened between us, just as if I was born yesterday. Farewell, dear wife and child, for ever!' Just then the sun rose, and away he walked towards the wood. She saw it open before him and close after him, and when she came up, she could no more get in than she could break through a stone wall. She wrung her hands and shed tears, but then she recollected herself, and cried out, 'Wood, I charge you by my three magic gifts, the scissors, the comb, and the reel—to let me through'; and it opened, and she went along a walk till she came in sight of a palace, and a lawn, and a woodman's cottage on the edge of the wood where it came nearest the palace.

She went into the lodge, and asked the woodman and his wife to take her into their service. They were not willing at first; but she told them she would ask no wages, and would give them diamonds, and pearls, and silk stuffs, and gold thread whenever they wished for them, and then they agreed to let her stay.

It wasn't long till she heard how a young prince, that was just arrived, was living in the palace of the young mistress. He seldom stirred abroad, and every one that saw him remarked how silent and sorrowful he went about, like a person that was searching for some lost thing.

The servants and conceited folk at the big house began to take notice of the beautiful young woman at the lodge, and to annoy her with their impudence. The head footman was the most troublesome, and at last she invited him to come and take tea with her. Oh, how rejoiced he was, and how he bragged of it in the servants' hall! Well, the evening came, and the footman walked into the lodge, and was shown to her sitting-room; for the lodge-keeper and his wife stood in great awe of her, and gave her two nice rooms for herself. Well, he sat down as stiff as a ramrod, and was talking in a grand style about the great doings at the castle, while she was getting the tea and toast ready. 'Oh,' says she to him, 'would you put your hand out at the window and cut me off a sprig or two of honeysuckle?' He got up in great glee, and put out his hand and head; and said she, 'By the virtue of my magic gifts, let a pair of horns spring out of your head, and sing to the lodge.' Just as she wished, so it was. They sprung from the front of each ear, and met at the back. Oh, the poor wretch! And how he bawled and roared! and the servants that he used to be boasting to were soon flocking from the castle, and grinning, and huzzaing, and beating tunes on tongs and shovels and pans; and he cursing and swearing, and the eyes ready to start out of his head, and he so black in the face, and kicking out his legs behind him like mad.

At last she pitied him, and removed the charm, and the horns dropped down on the ground, and he would have killed her on the spot, only he was as weak as water, and his fellow-servants came in and carried him up to the big house. Well, some way or other the story came to the ears of the prince, and he strolled down that way. She had only the dress of a countrywoman on her as she sat sewing at the window, but that did not hide her beauty, and he was greatly puzzled after he had a good look, just as a

body is puzzled to know whether something happened to him when he was young or if he only dreamed it. Well, the witch's daughter heard about it too, and she came to see the strange girl; and what did she find her doing but cutting out the pattern of a gown from brown paper; and as she cut away, the paper became the richest silk she ever saw. The witch's daughter looked on with greedy eyes, and, says she, 'What would you be satisfied to take for that scissors?' 'I'll take nothing,' says she, 'but leave to spend one night outside the prince's chamber.' Well, the proud lady fired up, and was going to say something dreadful; but the scissors kept on cutting, and the silk growing richer and richer every inch. So she promised what the girl had asked her.

When night came on she was let into the palace and lay down till the prince was in such a dead sleep that all she did couldn't awake him. She sung this verse to him, sighing and sobbing, and kept singing it the night long, and it was all in vain:

Four long years I was married to thee; Three sweet babes I bore to thee; Brown Bear of Norway, turn to me.

At the first dawn the proud lady was in the chamber, and led her away, and the footman of the horns put out his tongue at her as she was quitting the palace.

So there was no luck so far; but the next day the prince passed by again and looked at her, and saluted her kindly, as a prince might a farmer's daughter, and passed on; and soon the witch's daughter passed by, and found her combing her hair, and pearls and diamonds dropping from it.

Well, another bargain was made, and the princess spent another night of sorrow, and she left the castle at daybreak, and the footman was at his post and enjoyed his revenge.

The third day the prince went by, and stopped to talk with the strange woman. He asked her could he do anything to serve her, and she said he might. She asked him did he ever wake at night. He said that he often did, but that during the last two nights he was listening to a sweet song in his dreams, and could not wake, and that the voice was one that he must have known and loved in some other world long ago. Says she, 'Did you drink any sleepy posset either of these evenings before you went to bed?' 'I did,' said he. 'The two evenings my wife gave me something to drink, but I don't know whether it was a sleepy posset or not.' 'Well, prince,' said she, 'as you say you would wish to oblige me, you can do it by not tasting any drink to-night.' 'I will not,' says he, and then he went on his walk.

Well, the great lady came soon after the prince, and found the stranger using her hand-reel and winding threads of gold off it, and the third bargain was made.

That evening the prince was lying on his bed at twilight, and his mind much disturbed; and the door opened, and in his princess walked, and down she sat by his bedside and sung:

Four long years I was married to thee; Three sweet babes I bore to thee; Brown Bear of Norway, turn to me.

'Brown Bear of Norway!' said he. 'I don't understand you.' 'Don't you remember, prince, that I was your wedded wife for four years?' 'I do not,' said he, 'but I'm sure I wish it was so.' 'Don't you remember our three babes that are still alive?' 'Show me them. My mind is all a heap of confusion.' 'Look for the half of our marriage ring, that hangs at your neck, and fit it to this.' He did so, and the same moment the charm was broken. His full memory came back on him, and he flung his arms round his wife's neck, and both burst into tears.

Well, there was a great cry outside, and the castle walls were heard splitting and cracking. Everyone in the castle was alarmed, and made their way out. The prince and princess went with the rest, and by the time all were safe on the lawn, down came the building, and made the ground tremble for miles round. No one ever saw the witch and her daughter afterwards. It was not long till the prince and princess had

their children with them, and then they set out for their own palace. The kings of Ireland and of Munster and Ulster, and their wives, soon came to visit them, and may every one that deserves it be as happy as the Brown Bear of Norway and his family.

Source:

Various. "The Brown Bear of Norway". *Lilac Fairy Book*. Ed. Andrew Lang.