

The Bear

Once on a time there was a king who had an only daughter. He was so proud and so fond of her, that he was in constant terror that something would happen to her if she went outside the palace, and thus, owing to his great love for her, he forced her to lead the life of a prisoner, shut up within her own rooms.

The princess did not like this at all, and one day she complained about it very bitterly to her nurse. Now, the nurse was a witch, though the king did not know it. For some time she listened and tried to soothe the princess; but when she saw that she would not be comforted, she said to her: 'Your father loves you very dearly, as you know. Whatever you were to ask from him he would give you. The one thing he will not grant you is permission to leave the palace. Now, do as I tell you. Go to your father and ask him to give you a wooden wheel-barrow, and a bear's skin. When you have got them bring them to me, and I will touch them with my magic wand. The wheel-barrow will then move of itself, and will take you at full speed wherever you want to go, and the bear's skin will make such a covering for you, that no one will recognise you.'

So the princess did as the witch advised her. The king, when he heard her strange request, was greatly astonished, and asked her what she meant to do with a wheel-barrow and a bear's skin. And the princess answered, 'You never let me leave the house—at least you might grant me this request' So the king granted it, and the princess went back to her nurse, taking the barrow and the bear's skin with her.

As soon as the witch saw them, she touched them with her magic wand, and in a moment the barrow began to move about in all directions. The princess next put on the bear's skin, which so completely changed her appearance, that no one could have known that she was a girl and not a bear. In this strange attire she seated herself on the barrow, and in a few minutes she found herself far away from the palace, and moving rapidly through a great forest. Here she stopped the barrow with a sign that the witch had shown her, and hid herself and it in a thick grove of flowering shrubs.

Now it happened that the prince of that country was hunting with his dogs in the forest. Suddenly he caught sight of the bear hiding among the shrubs, and calling his dogs, hounded them on to attack it. But the girl, seeing what peril she was in, cried, 'Call off your dogs, or they will kill me. What harm have I ever done to you?' At these words, coming from a bear, the prince was so startled that for a moment he stood stock-still, then he said quite gently, 'Will you come with me? I will take you to my home.'

'I will come gladly,' replied the bear; and seating herself on the barrow it at once began to move in the direction of the prince's palace. You may imagine the surprise of the prince's mother when she saw her son return accompanied by a bear, who at once set about doing the house-work better than any servant that the queen had ever seen.

Now it happened that there were great festivities going on in the palace of a neighbouring prince, and at dinner, one day, the prince said to his mother: 'This evening there is to be a great ball, to which I must go.'

And his mother answered, 'Go and dance, and enjoy yourself.'

Suddenly a voice came from under the table, where the bear had rolled itself, as was its wont: 'Let me come to the ball; I, too, would like to dance.'

But the only answer the prince made was to give the bear a kick, and to drive it out of the room.

In the evening the prince set off for the ball. As soon as he had started, the bear came to the queen and implored to be allowed to go to the ball, saying that she would hide herself so well that no one would know she was there. The kind-hearted queen could not refuse her.

Then the bear ran to her barrow, threw off her bear's skin, and touched it with the magic wand that the witch had given her. In a moment the skin was changed into an exquisite ball dress woven out of moon-beams, and the wheel-barrow was changed into a carriage drawn by two prancing steeds. Stepping into the carriage the princess drove to the grand entrance of the palace. When she entered the ball-room, in her wondrous dress of moon-beams, she looked so lovely, so different from all the other guests, that everyone wondered who she was, and no one could tell where she had come from.

From the moment he saw her, the prince fell desperately in love with her, and all the evening he would dance with no one else but the beautiful stranger.

When the ball was over, the princess drove away in her carriage at full speed, for she wished to get home in time to change her ball dress into the bear's skin, and the carriage into the wheel-barrow, before anyone discovered who she was.

The prince, putting spurs into his horse, rode after her, for he was determined not to let her out of his sight. But suddenly a thick mist arose and hid her from him. When he reached his home he could talk to his mother of nothing else but the beautiful stranger with whom he had danced so often, and with whom he was so much in love. And the bear beneath the table smiled to itself, and muttered: 'I am the beautiful stranger; oh, how I have taken you in!'

The next evening there was a second ball, and, as you may believe, the prince was determined not to miss it, for he thought he would once more see the lovely girl, and dance with her and talk to her, and make her talk to him, for at the first ball she had never opened her lips.

And, sure enough, as the music struck up the first dance, the beautiful stranger entered the room, looking even more radiant than the night before, for this time her dress was woven out of the rays of the sun. All evening the prince danced with her, but she never spoke a word.

When the ball was over he tried once more to follow her carriage, that he might know whence she came, but suddenly a great waterspout fell from the sky, and the blinding sheets of rain hid her from his sight.

When he reached his home he told his mother that he had again seen the lovely girl, and that this time she had been even more beautiful than the night before. And again the bear smiled beneath the table, and muttered: 'I have taken him in a second time, and he has no idea that I am the beautiful girl with whom he is so much in love.'

On the next evening, the prince returned to the palace for the third ball. And the princess went too, and this time she had changed her bear's skin into a dress woven out of the star-light, studded all over with gems, and she looked so dazzling and so beautiful, that everyone wondered at her, and said that no one so beautiful had ever been seen before. And the prince danced with her, and, though he could not induce her to speak, he succeeded in slipping a ring on her finger.

When the ball was over, he followed her carriage, and rode at such a pace that for long he kept it in sight. Then suddenly a terrible wind arose between him and the carriage, and he could not overtake it.

When he reached his home he said to his mother, 'I do not know what is to become of me; I think I shall go mad, I am so much in love with that girl, and I have no means of finding out who she is. I danced with her and I gave her a ring, and yet I do not know her name, nor where I am to find her.'

Then the bear laughed beneath the table and muttered to itself.

And the prince continued: 'I am tired to death. Order some soup to be made for me, but I don't want that bear to meddle with it. Every time I speak of my love the brute mutters and laughs, and seems to mock at me. I hate the sight of the creature!'

When the soup was ready, the bear brought it to the prince; but before handing it to him, she dropped into the plate the ring the prince had given her the night before at the ball. The prince began to eat his soup very slowly and languidly, for he was sad at heart, and all his thoughts were busy, wondering how and where he could see the lovely stranger again. Suddenly he noticed the ring at the bottom of the plate. In a moment he recognised it, and was dumb with surprise.

Then he saw the bear standing beside him, looking at him with gentle, beseeching eyes, and something in the eyes of the bear made him say: 'Take off that skin, some mystery is hidden beneath it.'

And the bear's skin dropped off, and the beautiful girl stood before him, in the dress woven out of the star-light, and he saw that she was the stranger with whom he had fallen so deeply in love. And now she appeared to him a thousand times more beautiful than ever, and he led her to his mother. And the princess told them her story, and how she had been kept shut up by her father in his palace, and how she had wearied of her imprisonment. And the prince's mother loved her, and rejoiced that her son should have so good and beautiful a wife.

So they were married, and lived happily for many years, and reigned wisely over their kingdom.

Source:

Various. "The Bear." *Grey Fairy Book*. Ed. Andrew Lang. Electronic.