

## **Bearskin** **Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm**

Once upon a time there was a young fellow who enlisted as a soldier, conducted himself bravely, and was always at the very front when it was raining bullets. As long as the war lasted all went well, but when peace was made he was dismissed, and the captain said he could go wherever he wanted to.

His parents were dead, and he had no longer a home, so he went to his brothers and asked them to support him until there was another war. The brothers, however, were hardhearted and said, "What can we do with you? We have no work for you. See that you go and make a living for yourself."

The soldier had nothing left but his gun, so, putting it on his shoulder, he went forth into the world.

He came to a large heath, on which nothing was to be seen but a circle of trees. Filled with sorrow, he sat down beneath them and thought about his fate. "I have no money," he thought, "and the only trade I have learned is that of making war, and now that they have made peace they can no longer use me, so I see that I shall starve." Suddenly he heard a rustling sound, and when he looked around, a strange man was standing before him. He wore a green jacket and looked quite stately, but he had a hideous horse's foot. "I know what you are in need of," said the man. "You shall have money and property, as much as you, with all your might, can squander away, but first I must know if you are fearless, so that I won't be giving away my money for nothing."

"A soldier and fear -- how can those go together?" he answered, "You can put me to the test."

"Very well," answered the man, "look behind you."

The soldier turned around and saw a large growling bear running towards him. "Aha," shouted the soldier, "I'll tickle your nose until you lose your desire for growling." Then taking aim at the bear, he shot it in the snout, and it fell down motionless. "I see quite well," said the stranger, "that you do not lack for courage, but there is one more condition that you will have to fulfill."

"If it does not endanger my salvation," answered the soldier, who knew quite well who was standing before him. "Otherwise I'll have nothing to do with it."

"You'll see about that for yourself," answered Greenjacket. "For the next seven years you are neither to wash yourself, nor comb your beard and hair, nor cut your nails, nor say the Lord's prayer. I will give you a jacket and a cloak, which you must wear during this time. If you die during these seven years, you are mine. If you stay alive, you are free, and rich as well, for all the rest of your life."

The soldier thought about his desperate situation, and having faced death so often before, he decided to risk it now as well, and he entered into the agreement. The devil took off his green jacket and gave it to the soldier, saying, "Whenever you wear this jacket and reach into its pocket, you will find a handful of money." Then he pulled the skin off the bear and said, "This shall be your cloak, and your bed as well, for you are to sleep on it, and you are not allowed to lie in any other bed. Because of your clothing you shall you be called Bearskin." With that the devil disappeared.

The soldier put on the jacket, immediately reached into the pocket, and found that the promise was really true. Then he put on the bearskin and went forth into the world. He did whatever he pleased, refraining from nothing that did him good and his money harm.

During the first year his appearance was still acceptable, but during the second he looked like a monster. His hair covered nearly his entire face. His beard looked like a piece of coarse felt cloth. His fingers had claws, and his face was so covered with dirt that if someone had planted cress on it, it would have grown. Everyone who saw him ran away. However, because everywhere he went he gave money to the poor to pray that he might not die during the seven years, and because he paid well for everything, he always found shelter.

In the fourth year he arrived an inn. The innkeeper would not let him enter, refusing even to let him have a place in the stable because he was afraid he would frighten the horses. However, when Bearskin reached into his pocket and pulled out a handful of ducats, the innkeeper softened and gave him a room in an outbuilding. Bearskin, however, had to promise not to let himself be seen, lest the inn should get a bad name.

One evening Bearskin was sitting alone, wishing with all his heart that the seven years were over, he heard a loud moaning in a neighboring room. He had a compassionate heart, so he opened the door and saw an old man weeping bitterly and striking his hands together above his head. Bearskin went nearer, but the man jumped to his feet and tried to run away. At last, hearing a human voice, the man let Bearskin talk to him, and with friendly words Bearskin succeeded in getting the old man to reveal the cause of his grief. Slowly but surely the old man had lost his wealth, and now he and his daughters would have to starve. He was so poor that he could not pay the innkeeper and was to be sent to prison. "If that is your only problem," said Bearskin, "I have money enough." He called for the innkeeper and paid him, and then put a bag full of gold into the poor man's pocket. When the old man saw that he was freed from all his troubles he did not know how to show his gratitude. "Come with me," he said to Bearskin. "My daughters are all miracles of beauty. Choose one of them for your wife. When she hears what you have done for me she will not refuse you. You do look a little strange, to be sure, but she will put you in order again."

This pleased Bearskin well, and he went with the old man. When the oldest daughter saw him she was so terrified at his face that she screamed and ran away. The second one stood still and looked at him from head to foot, but then she said, "How can I accept a husband who no longer has a human form? The shaved bear that once was here and passed itself off for a man pleased me far better. At least it was wearing a hussar's fur and white gloves. If ugliness were his only flaw, I could get used to him." The youngest one, however, said, "Father, dear, he must be a good man to have helped you out of your trouble. If you promised him a bride for doing so, your word must be kept."

It was a pity that Bearskin's face was covered with dirt and hair, for otherwise they would have seen how his heart laughed within his body when he heard these words. He took a ring from his finger, broke it in two, and gave her one half. He kept the other half himself. He then wrote his name inside her half, and her name inside his. He asked her to take good care of her piece. Then he took leave saying, "I must wander about for three more years. If I do not return at that time you are free, for I shall be dead. But ask God to preserve my life." The poor bride-to-be dressed herself entirely in black, and when she thought about her future bridegroom, tears came into her eyes. From her sisters she received nothing but contempt and scorn. "Be careful," said the oldest. "If you give him your hand, he will hit you with his claws." "Beware," said the second. "Bears like sweet things, and if he takes a liking to you, he will eat you up." "You must always do what he wants you to," continued the oldest, "or he will begin to growl." And the second added, "But the wedding will be merry, for bears dance well."

The bride-to-be said nothing and did not let them irritate her. Bearskin, however, traveled about the world from one place to another, did good wherever he could, and gave generously to the poor that they might pray for him. Finally, at dawn on the last day of the seven years, he went once more out to the heath, and seated himself beneath the circle of trees. Before long the wind began to howl, and the devil stood before him, looking at him angrily. He threw Bearskin's old jacket to him and demanded the return of his own green one. "We haven't gotten that far yet," answered Bearskin. "First of all you have to clean me up." Whether the devil wanted to or not, he had to fetch water and wash off Bearskin, comb his hair, and cut his nails. After this he looked like a brave soldier and was much better looking than he had ever been before.

When the devil was safely gone Bearskin was quite lighthearted. He went into the town, purchased a splendid velvet jacket, seated himself in a carriage drawn by four white horses, and drove to his bride's house. No one recognized him. The father took him for a distinguished colonel and led him into the room where his daughters were sitting. He was given a seat between the two oldest ones. They poured wine for him, served him the finest things to eat, and thought that they had never seen a more handsome man in all the world.

The bride-to-be, however, sat across from him in her black dress without raising her eyes or speaking a word. Finally he asked the father if he would give him one of his daughters for a wife, whereupon the two oldest ones jumped up and ran into their bedrooms to put on splendid dresses, for each of them thought that she was the chosen one.

As soon as he was alone with his bride-to-be, the stranger brought out his half of the ring and dropped it into a glass of wine, which he handed across the table to her. She took the wine, but when she had drunk it and found the half ring lying at the bottom, her heart began to beat. She took the other half, which she wore on a ribbon around her neck, put them together, and saw that the two pieces matched perfectly.

Then he said, "I am your betrothed bridegroom, whom you saw as Bearskin. Through God's grace I have regained my human form and have become clean again."

He went to her, embraced her, and gave her a kiss. In the meantime the two sisters came back in full dress. When they saw that the youngest sister had received the handsome man, and heard that he was Bearskin, they ran out filled with anger and rage. One of them drowned herself in the well. The other hanged herself on a tree.

That evening, someone knocked at the door, and when the bridegroom opened it, it was the devil in his green jacket, who said, "You see, I now have two souls for the one of yours."