

How the Little Brother Set Free His Big Brothers

by Andrew Lang

from *The Brown Fairy Book*

In a small hut, right in the middle of the forest, lived a man, his wife, three sons and a daughter. For some reason, all the animals seemed to have left that part of the country, and food grew very scarce; so, one morning, after a night of snow, when the tracks of beasts might be easily seen, the three boys started off to hunt.

They kept together for some time, till they reached a place where the path they had been following split into two, and one of the brothers called his dog and went to the left, while the others took the trail to the right. These had not gone far when their dogs scented a bear, and drove him out from the thicket. The bear ran across a clearing, and the elder brother managed to place an arrow right in his head.

They both took up the bear, and carried it towards home, meeting the third at the spot where they had parted from him. When they reached home they threw the bear down on the floor of the hut saying,

‘Father, here is a bear which we killed; now we can have some dinner.’

But the father, who was in a bad temper, only said:

‘When I was a young man we used to get two bears in one day.’

The sons were rather disappointed at hearing this, and though there was plenty of meat to last for two or three days, they started off early in the morning down the same trail that they had followed before. As they drew near the fork a bear suddenly ran out from behind a tree, and took the path on the right. The two elder boys and their dogs pursued him, and soon the second son, who was also a good shot,

killed him instantly with an arrow. At the fork of the trail, on their way home, they met the youngest, who had taken the left-hand road, and had shot a bear for himself. But when they threw the two bears triumphantly on the floor of the hut their father hardly looked at them, and only said:

‘When I was a young man I used to get three bears in one day.’

The next day they were luckier than before, and brought back three bears, on which their father told them that HE had always killed four. However, that did not prevent him from skinning the bears and cooking them in a way of his own, which he thought very good, and they all ate an excellent supper.

Now these bears were the servants of the great bear chief who lived in a high mountain a long way off. And every time a bear was killed his shadow returned to the house of the bear chief, with the marks of his wounds plainly to be seen by the rest.

The chief was furious at the number of bears the hunters had killed, and determined that he would find some way of destroying them. So he called another of his servants, and said to him:

‘Go to the thicket near the fork, where the boys killed your brothers, and directly they or the dogs see you return here as fast as ever you can. The mountain will open to let you in, and the hunters will follow you. Then I shall have them in my power, and be able to revenge myself.’

The servant bowed low, and started at once for the fork, where he hid himself in the bushes.

By-and-by the boys came in sight, but this time there were only two of them, as the youngest had stayed at home. The air was warm and damp, and the snow soft and slushy, and the elder brother’s bowstring

hung loose, while the bow of the younger caught in a tree and snapped in half. At that moment the dogs began to bark loudly, and the bear rushed out of the thicket and set off in the direction of the mountain. Without thinking that they had nothing to defend themselves with, should the bear turn and attack them, the boys gave chase. The bear, who knew quite well that he could not be shot, sometimes slackened his pace and let the dogs get quite close; and in this way the elder son reached the mountain without observing it, while his brother, who had hurt his foot, was still far behind.

As he ran up, the mountain opened to admit the bear, and the boy, who was close on his heels, rushed in after him, and did not know where he was till he saw bears sitting on every side of him, holding a council. The animal he had been chasing sank panting in their midst, and the boy, very much frightened, stood still, letting his bow fall to the ground.

‘Why are you trying to kill all my servants?’ asked the chief. ‘Look round and see their shades, with arrows sticking in them. It was I who told the bear to-day how he was to lure you into my power. I shall take care that you shall not hurt my people any more, because you will become a bear yourself.’

At this moment the second brother came up--for the mountain had been left open on purpose to tempt him also--and cried out breathlessly: ‘Don’t you see that the bear is lying close to you? Why don’t you shoot him?’ And, without waiting for a reply, pressed forward to drive his arrow into the heart of the bear. But the elder one caught his raised arm, and whispered: ‘Be quiet! can’t you tell where you are?’ Then the boy looked up and saw the angry bears about him. On the one side were the servants of the chief, and on the other the servants of the chief’s sister, who was sorry for the two youths, and begged that their lives might be spared. The chief answered that he would not kill them, but only cast a spell over them, by which their heads and bodies should remain as they were, but their arms and legs

should change into those of a bear, so that they would go on all fours for the rest of their lives. And, stooping over a spring of water, he dipped a handful of moss in it and rubbed it over the arms and legs of the boys. In an instant the transformation took place, and two creatures, neither beast nor human stood before the chief.

Now the bear chief of course knew that the boys' father would seek for his sons when they did not return home, so he sent another of his servants to the hiding-place at the fork of the trail to see what would happen. He had not waited long, when the father came in sight, stooping as he went to look for his sons' tracks in the snow. When he saw the marks of snow-shoes along the path on the right he was filled with joy, not knowing that the servant had made some fresh tracks on purpose to mislead him; and he hastened forward so fast that he fell headlong into a pit, where the bear was sitting. Before he could pick himself up the bear had quietly broken his neck, and, hiding the body under the snow, sat down to see if anyone else would pass that way.

Meanwhile the mother at home was wondering what had become of her two sons, and as the hours went on, and their father never returned, she made up her mind to go and look for him. The youngest boy begged her to let him undertake the search, but she would not hear of it, and told him he must stay at home and take care of his sister. So, slipping on her snow-shoes, she started on her way.

As no fresh snow had fallen, the trail was quite easy to find, and she walked straight on, till it led her up to the pit where the bear was waiting for her. He grasped her as she fell and broke her neck, after which he laid her in the snow beside her husband, and went back to tell the bear chief.

Hour after hour dragged heavily by in the forest hut, and at last the brother and sister felt quite sure that in some way or other all the rest of the family had perished. Day after day the boy climbed to the top of a tall tree near the house, and sat there till he was almost frozen,

looking on all sides through the forest openings, hoping that he might see someone coming along. Very soon all the food in the house was eaten, and he knew he would have to go out and hunt for more. Besides, he wished to seek for his parents.

The little girl did not like being left alone in the hut, and cried bitterly; but her brother told her that there was no use sitting down quietly to starve, and that whether he found any game or not he would certainly be back before the following night. Then he cut himself some arrows, each from a different tree, and winged with the feathers of four different birds. He then made himself a bow, very light and strong, and got down his snow-shoes. All this took some time, and he could not start that day, but early next morning he called his little dog Redmouth, whom he kept in a box, and set out.

After he had followed the trail for a great distance he grew very tired, and sat upon the branch of a tree to rest. But Redmouth barked so furiously that the boy thought that perhaps his parents might have been killed under its branches, and stepping back, shot one of his arrows at the root of the tree. Whereupon a noise like thunder shook it from top to bottom, fire broke out, and in a few minutes a little heap of ashes lay in the place where it had stood.

Not knowing quite what to make of it all, the boy continued on the trail, and went down the right-hand fork till he came to the clump of bushes where the bears used to hide.

Now, as was plain by his being able to change the shape of the two brothers, the bear chief knew a good deal of magic, and he was quite aware that the little boy was following the trail, and he sent a very small but clever bear servant to wait for him in the bushes and to try to tempt him into the mountain. But somehow his spells could not have worked properly that day, as the bear chief did not know that Redmouth had gone with his master, or he would have been more careful. For the moment the dog ran round the bushes barking loudly,

the little bear servant rushed out in a fright, and set out for the mountains as fast as he could.

The dog followed the bear, and the boy followed the dog, until the mountain, the house of the great bear chief, came in sight. But along the road the snow was so wet and heavy that the boy could hardly get along, and then the thong of his snow-shoes broke, and he had to stop and mend it, so that the bear and the dog got so far ahead that he could scarcely hear the barking. When the strap was firm again the boy spoke to his snow-shoes and said:

‘Now you must go as fast as you can, or, if not, I shall lose the dog as well as the bear.’ And the snow-shoes sang in answer that they would run like the wind.

As he came along, the bear chief’s sister was looking out of the window, and took pity on this little brother, as she had on the two elder ones, and waited to see what the boy would do, when he found that the bear servant and the dog had already entered the mountain.

The little brother was certainly very much puzzled at not seeing anything of either of the animals, which had vanished suddenly out of his sight. He paused for an instant to think what he should do next, and while he did so he fancied he heard Redmouth’s voice on the opposite side of the mountain. With great difficulty he scrambled over steep rocks, and forced a path through tangled thickets; but when he reached the other side the sound appeared to start from the place from which he had come. Then he had to go all the way back again, and at the very top, where he stopped to rest, the barking was directly beneath him, and he knew in an instant where he was and what had happened.

‘Let my dog out at once, bear chief!’ cried he. ‘If you do not, I shall destroy your palace.’ But the bear chief only laughed, and said

nothing. The boy was very angry at his silence, and aiming one of his arrows at the bottom of the mountain, shot straight through it.

As the arrow touched the ground a rumbling was heard, and with a roar a fire broke out which seemed to split the whole mountain into pieces. The bear chief and all his servants were burnt up in the flames, but his sister and all that belonged to her were spared because she had tried to save the two elder boys from punishment.

As soon as the fire had burnt itself out the little hunter entered what was left of the mountain, and the first thing he saw was his two brothers--half bear, half boy.

‘Oh, help us! help us!’ cried they, standing on their hind legs as they spoke, and stretching out their fore-paws to him.

‘But how am I to help you?’ asked the little brother, almost weeping. ‘I can kill people, and destroy trees and mountains, but I have no power over men.’ And the two elder brothers came up and put their paws on his shoulders, and they all three wept together.

The heart of the bear chief’s sister was moved when she saw their misery, and she came gently up behind, and whispered:

‘Little boy, gather some moss from the spring over there, and let your brothers smell it.’

With a bound all three were at the spring, and as the youngest plucked a handful of wet moss, the two others sniffed at it with all their might. Then the bearskin fell away from them, and they stood upright once more.

‘How can we thank you? how can we thank you?’ they stammered, hardly able to speak; and fell at her feet in gratitude. But the bear’s

sister only smiled, and bade them go home and look after the little girl, who had no one else to protect her.

And this the boys did, and took such good care of their sister that, as she was very small, she soon forgot that she had ever had a father and mother.

[From the Bureau of Ethnology, U.S.]